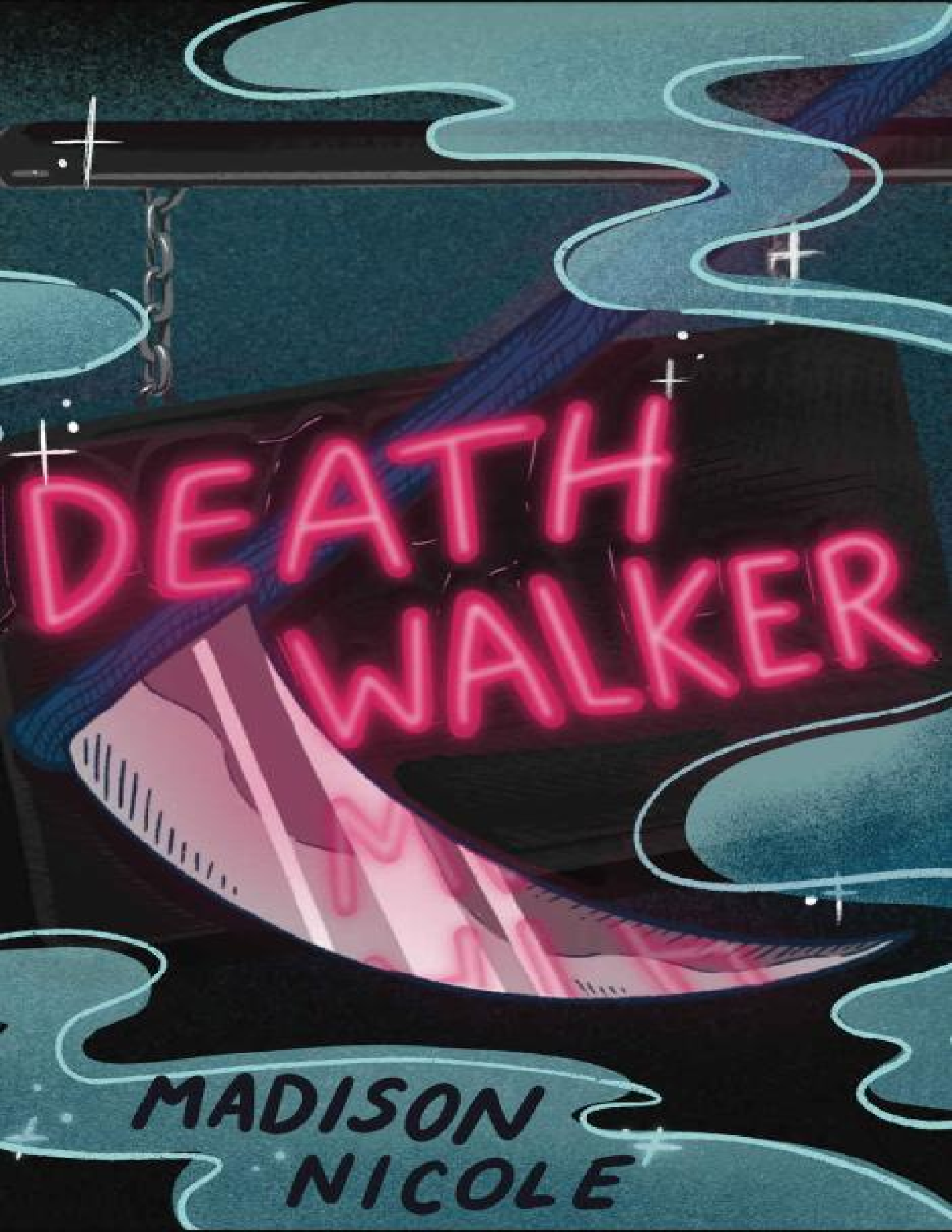




# DEATH WALKER

MADISON  
NICOLE

# DEATHWALKER

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MADISON NICOLE

MN BOOKS LLC

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*To the girls, gays, and theys...  
it took me twenty-four years to realize I was queer.  
You get to control your story.  
I love you.  
I see you.  
I support you.  
I am you.*

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## PLAYLIST

If you are interested in listening along to the playlist I used while writing this book, feel free to find it [here](#) and listen along. Happy reading!



## PROLOGUE

I think the first time I died was when I was five. I can't be sure, though, because I wasn't really *aware* that I had died before. It's probably best to start closer to where shit *actually* hit the fan in my life. It wasn't when I was five. It was much, *much* later. And that is where this story begins.

“How many people do you think actually use their college degree?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee. I turned to my best friend, Mara, expectantly. We were lounging on the large sectional in our apartment, spending a lazy Saturday morning watching a Lord of the Rings movie marathon on TV.

“I mean...I don’t know. People change their minds about what they want to do all the time. Most degrees are relatively versatile, you know,” she said, shrugging her dark brown shoulders. Her hazel eyes were still slightly sleep-deprived, considering she’d been out a lot of the night drinking with her new boy toy.

“Thinking of switching your job again?” she asked, taking a long sip from her coffee mug.

I let out a loud sigh, “I mean, maybe....”

I graduated college almost four years ago and basically get a new job every year. I am restless as hell. The pressure of having my shit figured out often works its way up my spine into my chest where it slowly suffocates me. It feels like my heart’s running marathons while my body’s completely immobilized. It seems to be getting worse as of late, which probably means I need to schedule an appointment with my therapist. Other people are absolutely fine not loving their jobs, without freaking out and quitting after a year. So why do I flee every job like I’ve committed some heinous crime in the office break room? Am I the weird one or is it everyone else? Sometimes, I just feel defective.

“Talk to me, Lincoln,” Mara said, pulling her full attention to me and giving me a soft smile as she fiddled with her long dark braids.

“I just don’t understand why I can’t be satisfied with anything. I got a business degree to have options, you know? And every job I’ve tried, I feel like something goes wrong. I’m drowning! Why can’t I just be a normal fucking human being who works their miserable life away and gets drunk on the weekend and stays busy to cope?” I huffed out the words, clenching my hands in the blanket wrapped around me. I ground my teeth together and closed my eyes for a minute to re-collect my thoughts.

“Linc, it’s okay that you don’t have things figured out. We are literally only twenty-five...,” she said, reaching over and giving my hand a squeeze. Mara knows the good, bad, and ugly about me. We have been inseparable since we were young and she is very familiar with my ongoing existential crisis.

“Have you talked to Isaac about it? I mean, since you guys are engaged now, maybe he’ll help fund an *Eat, Pray, Love* moment for you,” she said winking, tucking her feet underneath her and snuggling deeper into the couch.

“Yeah, he said he would support whatever I do,” I said, smiling slightly.

“See, problem solved,” she said playfully, pushing my shoulder.

I looked down at the diamond on my hand and sighed. It’s a pretty spectacular ring since I designed it myself: a rose gold band with a large emerald cut diamond, and small black stones on the side. No need to make him play guessing games about what I wanted. I simply created it myself.

Issac proposed just two months ago, and we are already in the throes of wedding planning. It almost freaks me out more than my job. I feel like a mess, financially and emotionally. It didn’t seem like the best way to start a marriage, but there would never be a perfect time. “Perfect” just didn’t exist, and we both fully accepted one another for who we are.

Isaac has his shit together as a mechanical engineer who makes good money and has a *regular* job. I’m the one going wild trying to find something that matches the constant restlessness inside my body. And he knows all this. We’re incredibly transparent and honest about our feelings. But sometimes it’s hard for me to rely on other people. I want to be a strong, independent woman who doesn’t need *no man*. Even though I want to be with Isaac, I just don’t want to *need* him.

Isaac and I have been dating on and off again for almost ten years. We met when we were in high school and fell in love hard and fast. We had some ups and downs, and periods of finding ourselves where we didn't speak for a couple of years. But for the most part, he just got me in a way no one else did. I always thought of him even when we weren't technically together.

I love him with my whole freaking heart and I'm ready for that part of my life to fall into place, even though it's scary. At least one part of my life will be grounded, and everything's easier with someone constant and reliable by my side. I had talked to him about it, to which he said he would financially support us as I tried to navigate what the hell I wanted to do. Right now, I'm working for several companies doing freelance social media marketing, and it's fine. However, I'm exhausted and bored with it. I need something else, some other purpose to drive me.

I tried corporate marketing and that sucked balls, not to mention my manager was actually the spawn of Satan herself. Then I tried event planning for a local company and found out that working every single weekend *also* sucked some major balls. After that, I tried working at a coffee shop but the money really wasn't good enough, and there was no way in hell I was living with my parents, so I started running businesses' social media pages. There was a lot of Googling and YouTubing involved on how to make the best social media decisions, but part of that came with the job. It was easy work compared to being emotionally spat on every day, but it wasn't fulfilling in the way I needed it to be.

"You love your job, though. You make nice money AND you have a good work-life balance," I said, staring at Mara accusingly, like she had the answer I was desperately looking for and she was just refusing to share. "What's the secret, my precious?"

"Ew, please keep your Gollum references to yourself. There is no secret, babe. I just found it. It's not like I knew being a pharmacist was going to be exactly what I wanted to do. Plus, you found a long-term committed relationship first so, we are one for one here on the expectations society puts on twenty-five-year-olds, okay? I mean, neither of us has a house or children so we're a little behind on a few other things, but hey, we can't do it all," she said, laughing loudly at her own joke and downing her coffee.

“Yeah, except a man can’t make you feel purposeful and fulfilled in your own life, no matter what Disney promised us when we were younger,” I mumbled. “Don’t even speak to me about the other things you mentioned either. I can only handle one thing at a time,” I said, throwing my head back to stare at the ceiling.

“You and me both,” Mara chuckled.

I didn’t like feeling lost. I was the one who normally had my shit together. I was the one with the five-year plan my entire life until I graduated college. Then I realized that I didn’t have a single clue what I was supposed to do for the rest of my life. I felt like I was having a midlife crisis *all the time* and it was getting really old, *really* fast.

“Linc, you’ll figure it out. Give yourself some grace and empathy here. You don’t have to have it together all the time,” she said, getting up and moving towards the kitchen.

“Tell that to my steady stream of anxiety,” I said. I set my coffee aside and lay down on the couch, hoping it would just swallow me whole. My phone buzzed on the wooden coffee table, and Issac’s name popped up. Smiling, I reached for it.

**Isaac: Hey babe! I want to talk to you about something. Can we grab dinner at your place tonight? I’ll bring pad thai.**

I don’t know why but whenever someone says they want to talk to me about something, my stomach immediately drops to my ass. But this is Isaac. We tell each other everything. He’s my fiancé and my best friend.

**Me: Okay! Is it bad? Should I be scared? ;)**

His reply came a few seconds later.

**Isaac: Haha not necessarily! I’ll be there around 6:30pm.**

*Okayyy, weird.*

**Me: Cool, sounds good. I love you!**

**Isaac: Love you too.**

“Hey! Isaac and I are talking about something important tonight. Could we have the apartment to ourselves?” I said, peeking over the back of the couch to stare into our kitchen, where Mara was rubbing her eyes and refilling her mug.

“Oooh, sounds serious. Yeah, I think I’m going to see that guy again tonight! Is it wedding-related? You know, as your best friend and maid of honor, I should be privy to this shit,” she said, shuffling around, sipping on her third cup of coffee.

“Yeah, he’s being kinda vague about it, but maybe? Who knows? Want to go to a yoga class, and then we can both get ready for our hot dates?” I said, grabbing my phone again to look at the time.

“Yesss! I need to release some of this liquor,” Mara said, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

“Cool. I just need to chill the fuck out,” I said standing up and stretching my legs. I headed toward my room and sighed, wondering what Isaac wanted to talk about.



“Hi,” I said, snatching up the food from Isaac’s hands and leaning in to plant a kiss on his cheek. Isaac’s such a hottie. He’s tall, dark, and handsome down to a tee. He smiled, flashing his perfectly straight teeth, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “You seem nervous,” I said. “Everything okay?”

He swallowed and nodded, “Of course.” He stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He was wearing a dark red sweater that complemented his tanned skin. His dark hair had little snowflakes in it, and I resisted the urge to brush them away. He wore black jeans that hugged his muscular thighs and brown boots that were covered in slush.

My heart squeezed at the sight of him. I wanted to wrap my hands around his broad shoulders and drag him to bed, but also...food. I really wanted this delicious pad thai, and I was starting to get nervous about whatever he wanted to talk about. With the takeout containers in hand, I headed over to the couch, ready to dig into the noodles. Isaac sat on the other side of the couch with a tall spine and didn’t reach for the container I had set out for him.

“Linc,” he started as I put a whole forkful of the delicious-smelling noodles in my mouth. “I don’t want to get married.”

I started choking on my food and coughing as my eyes bugged out of my head.

*Did I seriously just hear that right?*

What. The. Hell!

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Isaac asked, suddenly worried and frantically getting water as I recovered from nearly being choked to death

by our dinner.

I nodded my head and took a huge swig from the glass in front of me. I just stared at him, waiting for him to say he was kidding, that I was getting Punk'd. Do people still say that? Or do that?

He said the conversation wasn't bad. I was confused at how any of what just came out of his mouth wasn't considered "bad." Was this a joke? It had to be a joke. But who would make a joke about something like that? Why would Isaac make a joke about that? My thoughts raced through my head, and anxiety started to wrap its way around my throat. A pit I didn't know existed in my stomach started to open up with no bottom in sight. The ability to speak seemed to have left my body.

"Did you hear what I said?" Isaac's dark brown eyes scanned my face, and he started chewing his bottom lip. Silence hung in the air, and I suddenly had no desire to eat anything at all.

"This is what you wanted to talk about..." I said slowly. My stomach turned into knots, and my whole body tensed up like I was getting ready to jump out of a fucking plane. He nodded and opened his mouth to start again, then closed it, running his hands through his dark hair and casting his eyes down.

"What the fuck?!" I was finally able to find words for what was happening inside me. Anger and hurt swelled in my belly from the depths of someplace I didn't even know existed. Isaac's face paled and he took that opportunity to start babbling like a complete and utter idiot.

"I just don't think I'm ready for this. I want us to be together, but what if we just put a pause on the wedding, you know? Like, I don't even know if I believe in marriage. I've never known a happily married couple, and my parents were shit at it. My dad's been married three times now. Like, what does marriage even mean?"

I blinked at him stupidly, not knowing how to respond to anything that was coming out of his mouth. His gaze kept bouncing around the room like he could barely stand to look at me.

"And I just feel like I need to figure some stuff out on my own, and I still want to be together. I just don't want the wedding or marriage part. I've been feeling this way for a while, and I just can't do it anymore with the impending wedding. I am freaking out, and we've been kind of distant and disconnected which definitely means we shouldn't be getting

married....” He continued to prattle on with a number of reasons and excuses to justify himself, and I felt like time was standing still.

I wanted to scream. To cry. To fling this goddamn pad thai at the wall. But I sat still, letting him talk himself to death until finally, he trailed off. His eyes finally found mine, and he looked at me expectantly.

“Why did you propose then?” I said, trying to find the right questions to ask and make sense of the literal bomb that just went off in my life. I scrambled to grab at anything that made sense. My thoughts and feelings were fractured like broken glass and every time I tried to pick up a piece, it sliced straight into my heart.

“You wanted me to,” he said, like that was a full, complete thought and not some utter bullshit, like I had forced him into a proposal. As if he hadn’t been an active participant in the whole thing.

Tears stung the backs of my eyes and I felt like I couldn’t get enough oxygen to my brain. My hands started to shake with rage and my whole body felt ready to combust in a million little pieces.

“We talked about this, *together*,” I said, my voice rising in a high-pitched tone. “We talked about each of our relationships and feelings about marriage and what we wanted from our future together. We agreed, *together*, that marriage and a wedding was our next step. Or did you suddenly forget about those conversations? We agreed *together* that this was the life we were building.” Tears had finally come and were pouring down my cheeks from anger, betrayal, and hurt. My heart throbbed, and I felt like I had a sudden case of the stomach flu.

“I just feel like I’m not happy right now. I need to work on myself. I haven’t felt happy for a long time,” he said, whispering into his takeout container.

“How long?” I said, biting out each word. He didn’t address any of what I said earlier, and I was fuming. I wanted answers. I wanted a reason that felt justified. I needed a better “why” than this rambly-ass explanation. I attempted to steady my breathing but I couldn’t. My whole body was on fucking fire and my stomach was doing acrobatics.

“Like, a year or so....” He looked at me with tears in his eyes.

I swear to god he has no fucking right to cry right now.

“You didn’t tell me for a *year* that you weren’t happy? Who the fuck are you?! Were you just saying what I wanted to hear all these months and



now, at the fucking finish line, you realize you can't do this anymore?" I screamed as I shook violently.

Remember how I said we were always honest and transparent with one another? Welp, I was royally, painfully, and stupidly wrong.

I let that realization wash over me, that the small white lies he'd told in order to fit in or make others more comfortable extended to our relationship too. I thought I knew the little fibs he told were just his way of coping in social situations, but obviously it was more. Suddenly, I understood that because he didn't know what he wanted or who he was, he had become a chameleon in every situation, including our relationship.

"I just don't know what to do," he said again, his lips trembling.

"So let me get this straight. All of the conversations we had prior to this, you've conveniently forgotten. You've been unhappy for a long time, but I had no way to help you because you didn't tell me *and* you want to stay together but call off the wedding because you suddenly don't believe in the sanctity of marriage? Even though my parents have already invested thousands of dollars into a wedding, and we've told our friends and family? And let me guess, you want me to deal with that bullshit because I *always* deal with our bullshit?" I stood, flinging my hands around as I paced the room.

My fists clenched so tightly that my nails dug in and blood prickled out. I always pick up the mess. I'm the one that always caved and said I was sorry first because I didn't want to fight. How had I not seen that before?

"Lincoln, I still love you. I just can't do all of this right now. Let's just stop the wedding and work through this together," he said, his eyes pleading.

I was completely and utterly rocked by the words coming out of his mouth. Like he was some alien from space.

"We could try couples therapy," I said letting my hopes soar high for a few fleeting moments, as if I could wrangle in the hurt and chaos of the last ten minutes. Then I could return to my normal tumultuous life where the biggest issue I was dealing with was my own personal identity crisis, and not slapping on the baggage of a broken relationship and wedding on top of that.

"I don't want to do that," Isaac screwed up his face like the idea repulsed him. Like I hadn't used therapy myself to cope with my own

anxiety and depression. Like he was too goddamned good for it.

“How the hell are we going to move past this, then? You want to keep doing what we’re doing to fix this supposed unhappy, disconnected feeling you’re having? That apparently you’ve been lying about for over a year without changing anything? Are you delusional?” I slammed my hands on the coffee table and snarled at him, my chest heaving. “You need to figure this out on your own, without me. Because I will not sit here and let you play pretend with me or my life any longer. We have known each other too fucking long and been together for too many years for you to treat me this way. You said you wanted this. *You* proposed to *me*. Don’t act like I forced you into this, you asshole. Get out!” I pushed away from the coffee table and walked to the front door.

“Lincoln please, I don’t want to be without you. I love you. I just can’t deliver on marriage,” he said, standing up and moving towards me.

“Then you shouldn’t have said you could. You shouldn’t have lied to my face. You should’ve figured that shit out before you set the expectation. So get out. I’ll cancel all the wedding stuff and, honestly, don’t fucking call me. Lose my number. Lose everything that I ever gave you in this relationship because I am out. We have done this too many times, broken up and gotten back together, over the years for you to do this to me. I deserve someone who wants to be with me forever.” Tears ran down my cheeks and I swiped at them. “I *want* marriage. I’ve always wanted it and you knew that, yet you played along anyways. Fuck you! Get the fuck out of my house and don’t fucking come back!” I ripped the ring off my hand and shoved it in his face.

“Please don’t do this. We can still be together.” He looked down at the ring helplessly.

My mind was scattered in a million places as I started to realize my picture-perfect relationship had cracks and holes that I had tried to ignore. I’d compromised and made myself less for this. How did I not know better? How did I let this happen?

I don’t know who I was more angry at. Isaac or myself? Either way, I couldn’t do this with him right now. I needed him to leave and to let me fix what had broken inside of me. How could I have let this happen in the first place? I really needed him to exit and never come back.

“You did this. And no we can’t. This is no longer good enough for me. Love isn’t enough for me anymore. *You* are no longer enough. Leave.

Now.” I grabbed his hand and closed it hard over the ring in his palm. I wanted to vomit from the touch. I could barely stand to look at him, let alone maintain any sort of physical contact. I practically kicked him out the door.

“I’m sorry, Lincoln, please,” was all I heard as I slammed the door behind him and sunk down into the floor, feeling the weight of the entire world crash into me. I wrapped my arms around my knees, and the tears poured out in waves. My body trembled as my whole future, and world, was flipped upside down.

I mourned the life I had been planning for years.

The relationship I thought I had.

Isaac.

And the girl who allowed herself to be fooled and blinded by dumb, stupid love.

I am a firm believer that not much happens out of the blue.  
Like the decimation of my relationship.

Clearly *I* felt like it was out of the blue, but Isaac had been planning to end things for a long time. Or at least end our potential marriage, with the consultation prize of just forever dating, and me compromising to his desires.

And I *always* compromise. I had been catering to his needs the whole time and throwing my own under the bus. I mentally went through our arguments where I would try and bring up something he had done, and he would then make me feel bad for making him feel bad.

Like, what the actual fuck.

The emotional manipulation had been weaved throughout our whole history, and my rose-colored glasses were gone, making it all painfully visible in this moment. I even saw him emotionally manipulate others and thought it was fine. The times he called into work saying his car broke down, when he had just slept in. Or the times he just told a little white lie to his friends who would easily believe him.

Isaac was charming, handsome, and very likable. It made for a great cover-up for all the cracks in his heart that he never fully dealt with from his past.

I should have known better.

Despite all that though, I thought love was enough. Now I don't know what to do with the weight of all those realizations slamming into my body one after the other. Because this wasn't out of the blue. I just chose to

ignore all the warning signs until it was too late. I'm so pissed at myself for playing along, for not sticking up for myself.

Instead of calling Mara and begging her to come home, I decided it would be a great idea to go to a bar. Alone. To drink my sorrows and anger away. I peeled myself off of the floor, shuffled to my bathroom, and looked at my pitiful face in the mirror.

My hair was a mess, sticking to my round face in several places from my tears. My eyes were red and puffy. My pale skin practically looked ghostly in this light, and my whole face had seen better fucking days.

I'm a pretty confident girl. My five-foot-two frame is small, round, and curvy. I learned a long time ago to love all the rolls, curves, and bumps that decorate my body. The scars I wear are badges of honor, but today I don't feel good about myself. Not because the image looking back at me makes me sad, but the gaping whole in my heart makes me want to break the mirror with my fist.

Moving through the motions, I tamed my long black hair back into a low ponytail and swiped on some concealer and mascara. Truly, that was the best I could do. Stumbling to my bedroom, I shrugged off my leggings and pulled on black jeans and thigh-high black boots with a tight black turtleneck.

I felt like I was celebrating the death of my relationship, so all black seemed fitting, and heels always make me feel like a boss bitch. I grabbed a heavy plaid coat, some white gloves, and a scarf, then made my way outside into the cold air.

Honestly, looking back, I don't remember walking onto the snowy streets of Chicago, but I remember looking up at the dark gray sky and thinking what a beautiful evening it was to have your heart ripped in two.

As I walked, people hustled to the bars on this cold Saturday evening. I found myself walking aimlessly until I stopped in front of a bar that was bursting with light, laughter, and the strong stench of alcohol. At least that's what it looked like through the steamy windows. Inside, people surrounded tables lit with candles and low lights that had shadows bouncing along the walls, casting everything in a moody, dark glow. I looked up at the sign that read "Deathwalker Tavern," which seemed like a really weird name for a bar. But it didn't matter because it looked like a fitting place to get lost amongst the noise and drown my sadness in tequila.

I pushed open the door and warmth welcomed me immediately. The place was pretty full. Most of the wooden tables were occupied with close friends and loved ones sharing drinks and laughter.

I've never been to Ireland, but this place looked exactly like how I imagined a romantic Irish pub to look, and I wondered if I had made a mistake. I didn't want romantic. Romance made me want to barf. I wanted to beat love up with a baseball bat and scream at it until my throat was raw.

My stomach rolled again as a fresh wave of emotional pain left me staggering towards the bar. If the romance became too nauseating, I would leave. But until then, I would stay and drink myself numb.

I slid into the leather barstool and placed my hands on the gray, wooden bar. There were mirrors lining the walls, reflecting the colorful liquids and ornate bottles dotting the shelves. I swallowed, trying to decide if it was a really great idea to get shitfaced or a really bad one. My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my coat pocket.

**Isaac: I know you're upset, but can we please talk about this more? I don't want us to end things like this. Please call me.**

I almost flung my phone at the mirrors so I could enjoy the destruction of something other than my heart.

So shitfaced it was.

I barely registered the bartender sliding up to me as she eyed me expectantly. I'm sure I looked half-crazed and feral because of the text. I felt ready to scream or melt into a puddle of tears. Neither one of those was a good option at the moment.

She laid a warm brown hand on top of my own gently, and the sensation pulled me back to reality. I looked down at her fingertips lightly brushing my skin and had a weird thought.

Her hand was soft and comforting on mine.

I must be really fucking desperate if a stranger's hand fulfilled my need for human touch.

"Are you all right, love?" Her voice had a slight English accent mixed with something else that I couldn't exactly place.

I whipped my head up and stared into two concerned gold eyes framed with thick black lashes. I swallowed and tried to come up with a proper answer to that question.

“You’ve got beautiful blue eyes, love, but they look sad,” she said, removing her hand from mine. Her hair was tousled around her, falling in gentle waves with pieces of gold, caramel, and dark brown shining throughout. One side was shaved slightly above her right ear, which was dotted with small crystals, and most of her hair fell to one side.

Damn. I wondered who did her hair because it was magical, and she had just complimented my eyes. The normal thing to do would be to say something nice back.

“Uh, thanks. But um, no. I am not okay, actually. Not at the moment,” I said transfixed by her luminescent eyes. Her dark, arched brows were furrowed, and her lips pursed in a concerned pout. I felt tongue-tied under the intensity of her gaze. I blinked a few times trying to get my brain to click back on.

She nodded like she understood perfectly and said, “Ah, one of those nights I see. What do you like, love? I’ll make something special to cure your woes.” Her hand found mine again, squeezed slightly, then slipped away.

She crossed her arms over her chest, her single-sleeved plum shirt hugged her body and revealed the extensive tattoo design dotting her exposed arm. I tried not to stare but I felt like I wanted—no, *needed*—to know what it was. It looked like weaving lines and swirls that wrapped around her strong shoulder and all the way down to her fingertips. Delicate metal chains wrapped around her wrists several times over, connecting to the metal rings decorating her fingers.

Honestly, I want to be her when I grew up.

Cool. Beautiful. Badass with something better than an American accent.

“Your tattoos are really beautiful,” I whispered, hoping that wasn’t a weird thing to say. Why did I feel like I’d suddenly forgotten how to be a normal person who has normal conversations with people?

Was it the breakup? The crushed heart in my chest? Or simply me?

“Thank you,” she said, her lips curling up.

“But um, back to your original question. I like tequila. And honestly, whatever you make, please just let it be something that helps me forget that the last two hours of my night happened.” I groaned out the last little bit as I put my head into my hands.

“My name is Priya, by the way. Sounds like you’ve had a tough go tonight.” Her hands moved swiftly, collecting bottles, mint, lime, and some other random things to start concocting my drink.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Lincoln. And yeah, you could say that. My fiancé—or, er...ex-fiancé—just said he doesn’t want to get married anymore, so I broke up with him and kicked him out of my apartment,” I blurted.

My mouth opened in an “O” only to have my hand cover it, as if saying it out loud had just cemented it in time. The painful realization that I almost married someone who felt like I had forced them into it made me want to vomit.

Priya raised her brow at me and chuckled slightly, “Yeah you need this, love.” She slid a glass of clear liquid with lime and mint in it my way, and I took a long pull. It tasted fresh and citrusy, like I was drowning in fancy tequila. It was exactly what I needed after the dumpster fire that was my evening continued to sizzle and crack in my bones.

“How did I not see this coming? I bent over backwards to try and do everything for him and, in the end, it was never going to be good enough. He was never going to be good enough. I’m so fucking mad at myself for letting myself go love blind to that dumbass. Like, why would he even propose if he didn’t want to get married?” I took another long sip of my drink. “We have been together for years! And we talked about how we both wanted marriage, and then he comes in with this bullshit of not believing in the sanctity of marriage? And about how he has been unhappy for the last year and doesn’t believe in couples counseling but wants to stay together? Even though he wants to call the wedding off when thousands of dollars are already invested!” I stopped and gasped.

My parents had already put so many down payments on the venue, food, dress, flowers, etc. I almost threw up, but instead, I slammed the rest of my drink down. I looked up with a wild gaze at Priya, who had understanding in her eyes. She gave me a sympathetic smile.

“My parents...how am I going to explain to them what happened? They already paid for so many things. Absolutely fuck me and that motherfucker Isaac,” I said as another drink appeared in front of me and Priya gave my hand another gentle, reassuring squeeze.

“One thing at a time, love. Save the logistics for tomorrow. Just breathe tonight. You’ve been through hell. The rest of that can wait.” Her



accent poured through each word.

“Yeah.” I shoved that worry down for another day. “You’re right. I just...I’m a doer. I get shit done. But you know what’s absolutely fucked? Isaac and I have been on and off for a long time, and this time there’s no coming back. I wasted ten years of my life either being in this relationship or recovering from it, and I have barely been with anyone else. How terrifying and pathetic is that for a twenty-five-year-old?” I said grumbling. “And what’s even more fucked is...I allowed him to be less than what I deserved because I was overcompensating for the both of us, and he was taking advantage of it. I never felt like I could fully trust him because he always could talk his way out of everything, including me bringing up my own concerns and feelings. Like, how messed up is that? It was always *my* fault for making him feel bad and no accountability for him. I just, I thought I was smarter than this, you know? But when someone is good at manipulating, you just can’t get past it. I always felt like I was just overreacting and being “too much,” but really he was never enough. Goddamnit, I don’t know if I am more mad at him or myself!”

I took another sip of Priya’s special drink.

“Fuck, what is this? It’s good,” I said looking at her gold eyes again as she flashed a white smile.

I should give her a badge of honor for Best Unsuspecting Listener.

“Let’s call it Priya’s Heartbreak,” she replied, chuckling softly. “Give yourself a little forgiveness here, Lincoln. You don’t need to feel shame or embarrassment for what made sense in your life at the time. Love makes us do so many things we wouldn’t normally do. It doesn’t make you weak or dumb. The fact that you are here now and able to see the truth is what’s important. He’s the one at fault. He took advantage of your love and kindness, and he should be the one who has to deal with those consequences and be held accountable. Not to say that any of those words actually make you feel better, especially after your heart got absolutely annihilated by this asshole. Isaac, did you say?” she asked, moving along the bar creating other drinks in big graceful movements.

She has a point. Love makes you do really fucked up shit to yourself, like accepting a less-than-worthy partner. But I suppose breaking up now is better than breaking up later.

“Linc,” I said looking at the back of her head. “My friends call me Linc.”

At this point, this woman knows my whole life story and has unwillingly tumbled into being my friend.

She froze, her hands hovered over a few glasses as she turned her head to the side and said, “Okay, Linc.”

“And maybe at the end of night you should also bill me for your therapy hour over here because I would say I don’t normally spill my guts to random strangers. But seeing as nothing about this night is normal for me, maybe this is just who I am as a newly single woman,” I said, throwing back the drink once more and swallowing it in several large gulps.

Priya let out a loud, musical laugh as she put a few drinks at the end of the bar for a server to pick up. “No billing necessary, but you will need to slow down just a little on those Heartbreaks. How about water in between, love? Let’s not add a nasty hangover to your troubles this evening.” She slid a tall glass of water towards me.

Aren’t bartenders supposed to keep feeding you alcohol?

I drank it greedily.

“More alcohol please,” I said, smiling at her.

I spilled more of my guts to Priya as the evening went on. Her reassuring words and laughter interrupted my long monologues between water and her Priya Heartbreaks. I was, however, thoroughly smashed. I had no idea how many drinks I’d had, or how much it was going to cost me. I could just add it to the long list of bad decisions I’d been making throughout my entire life, including the one where I thought marrying Isaac was good for me.

“We’re closing, love,” she said as she spoke to some of the servers and cleaned up the bar. I looked around and saw everyone else was gone except Priya and me.

My drunk brain thought that was funny, and I started bubbling with laughter. Drunk brain felt fun and free, like the rest of the world didn’t matter and nothing was sad or angry anymore.

I looked down at my phone and everything was fuzzy. I had a hard time sitting on the stool.

**Isaac: Please call me.**

**Isaac: I’m worried. I told Mara.**

**Isaac: She said she can’t get ahold of you. Please don’t do anything stupid. I still love you.**

I ignored all of his texts and slurred, “Fuck you,” as I fumbled with Mara’s messages. Mara’s the best. I just love Mara.

**Mara: Isaac said to check on you. What’s going on? I thought you guys were talking at our place. Do you need me to come home?**

**Mara: I checked your location and you're at some random bar. Isaac said he isn't with you and that you shouldn't be alone tonight.**

**Mara: Linc!! Text me back you bitch or I swear to god I will find you and drag your ass home.**

**Linc: Fineeeetell u laterrr**

Drunk me thought that was very convincing.

Mara, however, called me, and I answered the phone giggling.

“Hiiii,” I drawled out, nearly falling off my chair.

Priya rushed around the bar and gently put her arm underneath me. I realized she was quite a bit taller than me, even with my heels on. She wore tight leather pants and black lace-up combat boots. She really just kept getting cooler and cooler.

“I made a new friend, Priya. She’s very pretty,” I said, leaning into her frame and inhaling the fresh crisp scent of her hair.

“Priya, meet Mara!!” I exclaimed happily, shoving the phone in her face.

“Hi, Mara was it? It seems Lincoln here is quite sloshed. I can help her into an Uber and send her your way. She had a bit of a rough night from all the drinks and chatting we did. Seems like she could use a good friend,” Priya said.

Mara expressed her thanks before she asked to speak to me again.

“Lincoln Genevieve Matsen, get your ass home right now. You are so lucky Priya seems like a nice woman because otherwise, I would come there and get your ass myself. I’ll follow your location until you are outside of our place. I love you. Be careful. I’m so sorry, sweetie. Isaac told me. Fuck him. I’ll see you soon,” and the line went dead.

I stared at the phone and wrapped myself around Priya’s waist.

“Mara’s pretty, too. She’s my best friend. I have such pretty friends,” I said, slurring and pulling myself closer to her.

Priya laughed and I felt it rumble through her body as I was pressed up against her.

“Let’s get you home, yeah?” She helped me put my coat on, even though I didn't remember ever taking it off. Suddenly she had a coat on

too, and was shutting off lights and gently guiding me towards the front, since the rest of the staff had already left.

“I can walk,” I said as she locked up behind me. My gaze shifted to the snow-lined streets and the flakes still falling softly around me.

“Can you now?” she said, smiling and pulling a white hat over her long, dark tresses.

“Yes! See?” I walked straight out into the road as Priya double-checked the door and swiveled around to see me twirling around in the street with my eyes closed, laughing. Out of nowhere, a taxi whirled around the corner, hydroplaned, and slammed into me.

A scream erupted from me and everything went dark as my body slammed to the ground, one of my arms crushed underneath the front wheel.

That was the first time I knew I had experienced death.

The first time I knew I would come back.

“Lincoln!!” Priya screamed and ran to the street where my seemingly lifeless body lay broken, battered, and bloody on the cement.

The taxi skidded away and sped into the night.

“Fuck you! Bloody hell!” Priya screamed as she got down on her hands and knees.

It was like I was having an out-of-body experience. I could see the scene playing out, but I wasn’t truly a part of it.

She ripped off her gloves and frantically looked around to see if there was anyone to call 911.

“Fucking hell!!” she hissed as she felt for my pulse and waited, watching for my nonexistent breath. She started performing CPR then, pumping on my chest and adding breaths for five rounds, until she checked again and still I had no pulse.

I wanted to tell her it was fine. I was fine. But I couldn’t move, like my mind and soul were detached from my body and I could slowly feel myself being pulled back into my physical being. But I wasn’t quite there yet. I no longer felt drunk in this detached space. The snow slowly started to fall around me, covering my body and Priya’s eyelashes in an almost peaceful scene.

I couldn’t feel the cold of her hands on my chest as she pumped my heart. I couldn’t really feel anything physical at all. This was a bit new. I’ve never really had this out-of-body sensation so clearly before, like I

was walking some line in between life and death. It's never been this obvious that I was truly dead on the ground.

It should have scared me, right? Except I knew it would be fine. In my bones, I knew that I'd come back. It's like I was casually people-watching, except I wasn't observing strangers but, rather, myself. I felt at peace, oddly grounded as I slowly reconnected to my physical state.

She whipped out her phone, sat on her heels, and chewed her lip.

"Hi, my friend isn't breathing," she started, as I snapped back into my body, drunk as ever, and rolled over to throw up the contents of my stomach. I felt everything too fast, too aggressively, like I'd collided with a brick wall.

"No ambulance," I slurred, not very convincingly.

Priya's mouth opened wide. She mumbled, "Never mind," into the phone and looked down at me like I was a rare diamond that she just so happened to find on the street. No disbelief or fear. Just awe and intrigue.

"Lincoln, you had no pulse. You were...dead," she said, as I slowly tried to sit up. My head swam and my body screamed at me to lie down. So I did.

I closed my eyes and I sang out, "But I don't ever die, do I? My mom says I have nine lives, like a fucking cat. Funny, isn't it? I can't afford an ambulance on my insurance, you know, so best just let my body heal itself. I should be fine in a day or two or something. I always heal." I flailed my good arm around in the soft snow, fighting the nausea in my stomach. I was swimming in my alcohol-infused brain, and my body barely registered the wet, cold snow beneath me. I never really told anyone that I had several near-death experiences, especially not after meeting someone and knowing them only for a few hours.

"You've died before?" Priya asked slowly. I popped open one eye and squinted my face to look at her.

"Were you kissing me earlier? I've never kissed a girl before. I think I liked it." I giggled to myself and went back to flailing my working arm back and forth in the snow.

Priya sighed, and I heard her shuffling about in the fallen flakes. "Your phone is crushed. That damn driver drove off. And a normal person would have died from the impact, but it seems, Lincoln, you are quite fine, if not a little intoxicated," she said trying to pull me up from my erratic one-armed snow angel in the road.

“Can you tell me Mara’s phone number?” she asked, trying to heave my body up, being careful not to hurt me. I ended up sinking into her side and snuggling against her.

“You smell nice,” I said into her rib cage. She smelled like a field of wildflowers.

The laugh rumbled, and I felt it against my nose and smiled.

“Alright well, I suppose I can take you home with me and you can call her tomorrow. I imagine Mara will be pissed with you, but I’m not sure what else to do.” Priya sat me up gently and called someone on her phone.

My ribs ached suddenly, and I wondered if something else, besides my arm, was broken.

“Can you pick me up, love? Something’s happened...I’ve got a friend with me.” She stared down at me as I clung to her, like an oversized koala bear.

I don’t know how long we sat on the curb as I mumbled incoherent words to Priya and she stroked my hair in response. A sleek black sedan pulled up, and the window rolled down to reveal a young man, probably in his mid-twenties, with orange red hair, dark glasses framing his pale green eyes, and white skin.

“Who’s the friend?” he asked, hopping out of the car and looping one arm underneath me as he helped carefully maneuver me into the backseat. It smelled nice, new, and expensive. Priya slid in the back with me and buckled me up as I slouched against the window.

“Her name’s Lincoln, and I think she might be a deathwalker. Her arm was crushed underneath the car but it looks like it’s already healing. Did you bring the elixir?” She glanced at the guy, who slid into the driver’s seat. He nodded and handed her a small vial of bright green liquid.

“Linc, dear, can you drink this for me? It will help you feel better,” she said gently, tipping the vial to my mouth. It tasted like a Jolly Rancher. I licked my lips and had a moment of clarity where I realized that taking mysterious liquids from new people was probably not the best idea. But I didn’t care about being careful right now. The alcohol made it pretty damn apparent that I couldn’t feel much of anything at the moment.

“Is this your boyfriend?” I said, glaring at him slightly. Anger swirled in my belly as I shot daggers at him. Fuck men. Fuck boyfriends. *Fuck fiancés...or ex-fiancés*, rather.

My head felt really fuzzy. I laid it back against the cold window.

I noticed he seemed shorter than Priya by an inch or two and was built more elegantly. Fewer hard edges and more smooth lines.

He burst out laughing.

“No honey, I’m very gay. My name is Greyson. But you can call me Grey.” He pulled out onto the snowy city streets.

I closed my eyes and mumbled, “What’s a deathwalker?” Then slowly drifted to sleep.



Who the hell invited a fucking drumline into my head?  
I groaned loudly and laid my arm across my eyes.

“Hey love,” a husky voice said. “How are you feeling?”

The events from last night flashed through my mind in fragments. I gasped and sat up aggressively in a bed that was definitely not mine. Nausea swept through me as I tried to blink away the stars dotting my vision. I would absolutely not vomit right now.

Priya offered an amused smile. “There’s a trash bin right next to you, Lincoln, if you need to throw up.”

I closed my eyes, pressing the heels of my hands to my head and willing myself to not puke all over her maroon silk sheets. I hate throwing up, and I certainly don’t like throwing up in empathetic strangers’ homes.

It was honestly unfair that I was such a hot mess and Priya looked just as beautiful as she did last night. She had on an oversized gray sweatshirt with her thick dark hair braided to the side, exposing the shaved part of her scalp. She had on small sleep shorts and white athletic socks that came to her ankles, and her brown legs were on full display. She looked like she’d just stepped out of a magazine for Victoria Secret’s loungewear or something. And I was nursing the biggest hangover I’ve ever had in my entire life. All I wanted was to be swaddled in a giant blanket and to close my eyes and never wake up.

“Can I...,” I swallowed trying not to think how absolutely pathetic I looked or acted last night. “Can I get some water?”

I scrubbed my hands down my face and peeked through my fingers to see Priya shuffling over to the kitchen, which was right across from her giant bed. The space was open, from the kitchen laid out in front of me, with its rustic finishings, to the exposed brick and industrial touches. There was a plush, green velvet couch, colorful chairs, and a TV occupying the space. Sunlight spilled across the floors through giant windows that lay farther away, and a circular table was tucked in the corner with several chairs.

Even her space was cool and creative.

Priya padded back over and handed me a glass as she sat on the bed and tucked her legs in.

I swallowed greedily and lay back against the headboard. I stared up at the ceiling, which had exposed bulbs hanging from one end of the apartment to the other. Why, oh why, did I think it was a good idea to get absolutely wrecked by alcohol when my emotional state was in pieces?

“I really have no words for anything that happened last night,” I said, staring at the ceiling, trying to focus on anything but the aggressive thudding in my temples. I realized, suddenly, that I was in a snug T-shirt and a thong. I looked around and saw my clothes folded on one of the chairs.

“Did I just strip and crawl into your bed?” I was absolutely horrified. The audacity of Drunk Lincoln truly knew no bounds; she was absolutely incredible, and simultaneously tragic.

Priya laughed, the sound loud and dark. “I asked what you wanted to sleep in, and you asked for this. And I think you should call your friend, Mara was it? She seemed very worried last night, and well, your phone didn’t make it,” she said, her full lips breaking into a little smirk.

“Didn’t make it?” I asked, trying to remember all the details. “Oh, fuck me,” I said, my eyes growing wide, wondering how I was supposed to explain last night when I really didn’t even understand it myself.

I’d conveniently blocked that out of my memory. And I would have loved for it to stay tucked and filed away in my brain under the “Do Not Need to Revisit” folder.

Did I actually die on that street, or was drunk me hallucinating? Surely it was an alcohol-induced dream.

“Call your friend. Then we can talk.” She handed me her phone with her tattooed hand, seeming to read my mind. I grabbed it from her and

swallowed. I typed Mara's phone number in, patting myself on the back for having it memorized. I knew that I was not mentally prepared for the ass chewing I was about to receive.

The line rang, and I got lost in Priya's eyes for a moment before Mara picked up.

"Mara?" I said, wincing as I braced myself for the inevitable.

"Lincoln, what the fuck?!" Mara's scream pierced through the phone, and I pulled it away from my face with a grimace.

"Can you please not scream at me? I feel like I'm dying from a hangover," I hissed, fighting another wave of nauseousness. I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth, as if that would stop the vomit threatening to crawl its way up.

"Whose phone is this? Why aren't you picking up? Isaac has been blowing my shit up all night and this morning! I thought you had died! Find Friends couldn't find shit on your location. Start fucking talking before I lose it!" Her voice radiated with emotions: worry, fear, anger, relief. I couldn't blame her. I would've yelled at her too if she'd done the same thing to me.

"It's Priya's. She's the bartender that tried to help me get into an Uber last night but I, uh...." I looked at Priya's amused gaze and cleared my throat. "I flung my phone into the street in my horrendously drunken state because I was mad at Isaac. Then a taxi ran over it before I could fulfill the rescue mission. And I was too drunk to tell Priya your phone number, or our address, so I'm at her place right now," I said, trying to go through the mental checklist of her questions to see if I answered them all correctly. I conveniently left out that the taxi also hit me. I wasn't ready to visit that, myself, let alone tell Mara about it.

Silence hung in the air, then a sigh of relief.

"Well, thank her for taking care of my girl. Linc, what the hell with Isaac? I'm not gonna ask if you're okay because I know you're not. I know you got shitfaced by yourself because you're hurting. I love you, okay? What do you need from me? I'll come pick you up," she said.

My heart nearly doubled in size. Mara's such a good friend and I couldn't even tell her what actually happened yesterday. I discovered, then, that the strangest thing that happened to me yesterday was not that my fiancé called off our wedding. A new feeling of pain laced through my heart as I realized that my life had imploded yesterday. And in a weird

way, I feel relieved that I no longer needed to be the version of Lincoln that was perfect for Isaac. I can just be me.

No more compromising what I want for the sake of love or an argument. I don't have to be less for anyone else anymore. That doesn't mean the heartache is gone, but I found an odd sense of grounding in the fact that I had made the right decision in ending my relationship.

Sudden tears pricked my eyes and I wiped at them. I didn't know if I was crying for Isaac or myself, but it didn't matter. Priya handed me a tissue with an empathetic look in her eyes. She reached out and squeezed my knee which felt...nice.

"Yeah, can you come get me in an hour and a half? I'm gonna buy Priya breakfast for saving my ass. Can I text you from her phone when I'm ready?" I asked, stifling some sobs and trying to choke down the emotional tidal wave that was wreaking havoc on my insides.

"Of course, babe. I'll just be around our place, okay? We can do face masks and watch Queer Eye tonight or something. Whatever you need. I love you. I'll see you soon. I'm glad that you're physically okay. I was worried you'd been hurt," she said quietly.

Well, I looked down at my body and surprisingly didn't find any cuts, bruises, or marks from last night. Did I imagine it? I really needed to figure this shit out. My broken engagement. My career. My life and death experience. Not necessarily in that order, but at least I had my to-do list started.

"I'm sorry to worry you. I'll get a new phone tomorrow. Tell Isaac to go fuck himself. I love you, too. I'll text you when I'm ready." I hung up and handed the phone back to Priya, who now leaned against the wall with two steaming mugs in her hands.

She smiled and it transformed her sharp features into something loving and warm. "Sounds like you owe me breakfast, love. Do you want to wear what you wore last night or borrow something of mine?" She moved towards a door on my right, which I assumed was a closet.

"I think I've taken a lot from you already, and we are definitely not the same size so I'll just wear this shirt and put on my pants from last night." I sighed and looked down at myself, still tangled in her silky sheets and her shirt. "Can I bring the tee back later?"

She nodded and I stood up suddenly, acutely aware that I didn't have pants on, which was silly because Priya's just a woman. She's seen all

these parts before, so no reason to feel weird about flashing a little bare skin.

I sighed and straightened my spine, telling myself it was only odd because Priya's sort of a stranger and I'm a brokenhearted mess. Not to mention, showing your ass to someone is vulnerable, just like my emotional state at the moment.

Priya sent me a smile, that seemed like she held a secret, as she eyed me up and down. I looked away quickly to grab my pants and pull on my boots. I fished around in my coat for a ponytail holder, twisted my long dark hair into a topknot, and caught a glance at myself in her mirror. My eyes were puffy and I had dark circles underneath them. Shit, I looked like I'd been through some things.

Which, I mean, I had.

"Ready, Lincoln?" Priya asked. She had pulled on joggers and sneakers with her oversized hoodie, and a white hat. She even made athleisure look good.

"It's really unfair that I look like I'm basically doing a walk of shame here and you look like you just stepped out of Teen Vogue or some shit," I grumbled, grabbing my stuff and following her to the heavy metal front door.

Why am I so focused on her looks right now? Is this some weird girl crush because she took care of me last night? Maybe I'm just extra vulnerable and grumpy to the world right now so my confidence has taken a hit. But I'm hot as hell, even with a broken heart and a hangover. Period. Still, odd that I'm hyper-fixating on her so much. Another thing to unpack later.

She laughed, the sound, once again, loud and dark. "You look lovely, and you did get hit by something." She smiled, tucking a stray hair behind my ear, her eyes dancing. "And I don't think anyone has ever told me I look like I belonged in Teen Vogue. What an interesting thought." She opened the door and ushered me out.

I let out another sigh and tried to relax my shoulders.

Little did I know that this breakfast conversation would send my world into a tailspin. And here I was thinking that calling off a wedding would be the hardest thing I would ever do in my life.

Boy, was I wrong.

“Oh ma gawwwd,” I groaned, my mouth full of chocolate chip pancakes.

I had reached the part of my hangover when I needed to consume sugar or grease. I’d already ate some sausage links and bacon, so pancakes were up next, slowly chasing away the pounding headache and looming nausea.

“How have I never been here?” I asked. The place was packed when we got here, but Priya seemed to know the manager because we were placed in a room in the back, tucked away from everyone else.

The walls were covered with giant mirrors, little alcoves were furnished with wooden tables and brightly colored cushions. Young people were laughing and enjoying their brunch around us. Plants decorated the space like an overflowing garden.

We sat in the back where a little nook had been tucked behind the kitchen. Two bench seats sat on either side of a table, and the whole thing was enclosed and accessorized with soft pillows.

“I’m glad you like it.” She smiled.

I practically drowned myself in a whole pot of coffee while she stuck to lemongrass tea with honey in accompaniment with her breakfast hash. I wondered if that was a British thing. Then I wondered if that was a stereotyping thing. Then I stopped thinking about it altogether and just drank my damn coffee.

“So Lincoln, do you want to tell me what happened last night when you died in the street?” she asked, leaning on her tattooed hand and eyeing me

with amusement.

I nearly choked on my syrup-soaked pancake bite at the casualness of her question. “Er...I don’t...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, trying to swallow the sweetness down and chase it with a large gulp of coffee.

“You had no pulse, no breath and then you suddenly snapped back to life. Want to explain what that was about?” She sat back against the wooden bench as she spoke.

I eyed her and scowled. She was oddly calm about this.

“I find it very suspicious that *you* aren’t freaking out about this. Why don’t *you* tell *me* what that’s about, because I honestly don’t have a fucking clue.” I pointed my fork at her accusingly.

Priya giggled as I worked through the last of my pancakes. I had a feeling we might be here for a minute. The way she looked at me was like she was about to drop a bomb of knowledge.

“I think you’re a deathwalker. Does that mean anything to you?” She tilted her head, her eyes slicing into my soul. I felt bare naked in front of her, like she could see straight into my brain.

“Umm...well, it sounds like a zombie or something. I’m pretty sure I’m not one of those. Haven’t bitten anyone or hungered for human flesh in at least a couple months,” I said, winking at her and trying to wrap my head around what the hell she was talking about. I was hard-core deflecting. I wasn’t necessarily prepared for a conversation on life or death.

“Ha, no it’s not. So that doesn’t mean anything to you? At all?” She leaned forward.

“You said that last night to your, er...friend? Grey, right? I mean that’s the name of your bar, right? But I’ve literally never heard that word until last night,” I said, taking another long draw of my coffee only to realize it was basically gone. I just stared into the cup wondering where this conversation was going.

“Okay well, a deathwalker is someone who has the ability to overcome death. They exist between our world and the afterworld for periods of time. They are liaisons between the two realms, and they also have healing abilities that prevent death from fully settling into their souls.” Priya spoke slowly, as if explaining something scary to a child.

“Okay, I don’t think I’m one of those,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

What she said was crazy and irrational. But something about Priya made me want to believe the words coming out of her mouth. I do believe that there's an afterlife, and I can't deny that whatever happened last night actually happened. Not to mention, there'd been other times in my life when I experienced that same sense of detachment from my body in extreme situations, but never the way I experienced it last night. I also heal weirdly fast, but that wasn't *that* abnormal, right? None of this made any sense except for the fact that I was very drunk, very emotional, and very out of my mind.

"What happened when your heart stopped?" she asked calmly.

"Uh if I told you I had an out-of-body experience where I think my soul was floating above you while simultaneously sort of in my body, would you believe me?" I said half-jokingly, wondering why she hadn't accused me of needing to see a doctor yet.

"I would, yes."

"What, exactly, is this conversation?" I questioned. "I feel like I should be freaked out but, honestly, yesterday was like a fever dream and I really just need some semblance of an explanation." Frustration oozed out of me. I was mad at the whole world at this point.

And at Isaac. Especially Isaac.

Priya reached over and grabbed both my hands. Her touch was warm and comforting. I looked at our fingers woven together.

"Lincoln, I want you to listen very closely to me. You are special. You are not crazy. You have an incredibly unique ability, and the restlessness I'm sure you've felt in your soul isn't because you're broken. It's because you were meant for something beyond this." She waved her hand around in the air.

I blinked in surprise. How could she know that I'm restless all the time?

"There's a reason you walked up to my bar, love. The bar has a special way of calling people like you and making itself appear when you're feeling lost and alone. That prick of an ex-fiancé, as shitty as he is, inadvertently pushed you to where you're meant to be." She squeezed my hands and for some reason, I believed her.

"I wondered why I'd never heard of your place before, or how I found myself there. I know most of Chicago like the back of my hand. But a serious question: am I a zombie? Or will I turn to the dark side like Darth



Vader?" I questioned, trying to use humor to divert from this wild conversation once more.

She laughed again. "No, our society has such a misrepresentation of death and darkness. Neither are inherently bad, and we need both of them to complete us as human beings. But I don't want to overwhelm you today. You've had a lot of things happen in the last twenty-four hours. When you get a new phone, call me and I'll explain more of what this means, if you're interested in finding out what and who you are." She offered a reassuring smile that made something in my chest ache a little bit.

Reaching into her coat pocket, she grabbed a pen, then my hand. I raised an eyebrow, and she chuckled as she wrote her number on my palm.

"What are we in a bad '90s movie or something?" I grinned at her a little stupidly.

"Not today, Lincoln, my love." She capped the pen and tucked it away. "I would imagine Mara is probably getting worried. I can drop you off at your place if you want, no need for her to come get you." She leaned back into her seat again. Her braid was starting to fall apart, and several pieces framed her face.

Damn, why am I so captivated by her hair? Do I want to be her or be her best friend?

I was feeling vulnerable, emotionally and physically, which is probably why I was obsessing over her looks for no reason at all. She's beautiful and so am I, even if my heart feels like it's in a crumpled heap in my body.

"Thank you," I said. "For everything."

We left shortly after and she dropped me off at my apartment. I looked down at my hand, where Priya's number was now smudged, and smiled.

“Hi!” I said loudly.

I stood in our apartment staring at Mara, who was passed out on the couch. She woke up in a flurry and wiped at her eyes. Her braids had tiny curls peeking out at random spots, and she was in an oversized hoodie and leggings. Her eyes looked wild for a second before they focused, widened, and she cried out.

“Oh my god, Linc!!”

She sprinted towards me and wrapped her arms around me. I pressed my face into my best friend's neck and burst into tears. The familiarity of her and her fierce hug literally ripped off the fresh Band-Aid of what happened with Isaac, Priya, and everything in between. But I knew I was grieving more than that.

I was mourning my life before I found out that I'm supposedly a deathwalker which was weirdly comforting. Even though I didn't fully understand the definition of it, I knew in the depths of my being that it felt right. I had no idea how to explain all of that to my best friend, though. It felt like my life had taken a very chaotic left turn, and yesterday was the epicenter.

It was as if I had a life before, and now I have a different life after.

Oddly, having a label for this ability made it weirdly settling, like I'm not a freak of nature because there's a legitimate name for what I can do and what's happening. What little I know of the deathwalker abilities explained so many peculiar things from my past.

The events of yesterday felt like they were a catalyst for something bigger, and crying is my emotional release. Everything's different now, and the tears helped me begin to let go of all the old baggage. I don't know exactly what my life will look like moving forward, but I know things will be forever changed, like a shift in the universe has finally put me in a place I truly belong.

I finally feel a sense of grounding that has never been there before.

The future I had before felt like a lie, a deceit by Isaac. By myself. By the whole goddamn world. Yet somewhere, some part of me felt like my new path would be okay. Like *I* was going to be okay.

"Priya dropped me off. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you," I said, sniffing and wiping snot from my nose. She gripped my shoulders fiercely and looked me up and down, her eyes halting on the phone number etched on my hand.

"Priya's," I said, trying to come up with a reason why I would need her number on my hand. "Uhh so I can text her and give her back her shirt, because my phone is literally in pieces."

"You know you aren't allowed to find a new bestie, right? I will not be replaced," she said teasingly and wrapped me in another hug.

"How could I ever replace you?"

Mara gave a small laugh. "Tell me what happened yesterday. I'll save my lecture, only because I know you have a lot of shit going on. Just, please, don't leave like a reckless teenager in the night again, okay? I am not your mother but I am your best friend, and I swear to god if you die on me I will be motherfucking pissed."

I laughed uncontrollably because so much of what she said was too on point for this whole situation. I couldn't tell her that I actually died for a minute or two. I barely believed it myself, and I experienced it first hand.

She looked at me like I was unwell. Maybe laughing was the other release that needed to happen, too.

"Sorry, I just—what the hell is happening in my life?" I asked as we snuggled into our sectional, facing each other. "Isaac doesn't want to get married. He isn't happy. He felt pressured to propose. And he needs to work on himself. He doesn't believe in the sanctity of marriage either, apparently. But don't worry, he still loves me and wants to be together; he just doesn't want to be legally bound." I looked at my trembling hand, noting the absence of the large diamond that occupied it only a day ago. It

feels lighter without the stone, even though I had painstakingly designed it myself.

“You know what the stupidest part is? I sacrificed so much for him and his feelings, for what he wanted. I lost who I am so I could fit into this life with him, and he just kept taking and taking without giving anything in return. I thought love was supposed to lift you up, not make you worried and paranoid about how the other person thinks or feels.” A knot had settled into my chest and I absently rubbed at it, hoping the pain I felt in my heart would lessen the more I confessed to Mara.

“Isaac is so charming. People love him. But he isn’t dependable with my heart, or anything else for that matter. I’m sort of angry at myself for turning a blind eye to what I already knew. I wanted it to be him because I love him, but that doesn’t mean love is enough, or that it’s good for me. This feels like a weird weight off my shoulders and a stab to my heart at the same time, and it’s confusing but I know I’m going to be okay. I just wasn’t ready, you know? It was totally unexpected and it fully knocked me on my ass. Like, really fucking hard.” The vision of my body, bloody and broken on the street, flashed in my head and I winced, realizing that those physical injuries had already healed. Whereas this emotional one seemed to be settling deeper into my breastbone.

Mara sat there, her hazel eyes flared with anger, her cheeks flushed slightly with rage, then hurt. “You deserve more than that, Lincoln. Your feelings are so valid and I’m so sorry. I love you so much.” She pulled me in for another hug, and I ended up laying my head in her lap, looking up at her while she ran her fingers through my hair.

“I feel ripped open and raw, but at the same time, I feel like my rosy picture perfect relationship has been shattered. We weren’t as flawless as I wanted us to be. I don’t want to be with someone who thinks I forced marriage on them or who has forced me to become someone else for the comfort of themselves. I’m mad at myself for not waking up to this shit sooner.” I closed my eyes as her hands slowly worked through my dark brown tangles.

“I’m relieved, in a way, that at least he told me now instead of a day before our wedding, which—*shit*. I have to tell my parents and cancel everything.” I was suddenly overwhelmed by the idea of contacting vendors to say, “Yeah sorry, my fiancé doesn’t believe in marriage

anymore and is a piece of shit. Would you believe that? We'd like to cancel."

*Fuck that.*

That sounds like an actual nightmare that I never wanted to have. Ever.

*Goddamnit, Isaac.*

"I'll take care of it, Linc. Just tell me when and I'll get it done," Mara said softly.

My heart swelled with how much I love her. "Maybe give it a week or two and I'll let you know."

"Just tell me when, babe, and I'll take care of it. I should let you know, too, that he was freaking out last night, like he hadn't just ripped your world apart. I did tell him to fuck off, by the way, and he said, 'Mara don't be like that. I still love her,' and then I told him to shove it up his ass."

I could practically envision the venom in her tone as she told him off on the phone, and it made me oddly happy. I laughed, looking up at her. "He deserves it, honestly. But now I know the relationship will never work. I tried for years and even though it's painful, at least I know where I stand on it now. I just can't believe it got so far. I should've seen it. I'm smarter than this," I said, feeling angry at myself again.

"Love is blind. You did the best you could with what you had." She kneaded her fingers into my scalp, and I fluttered my eyes closed. I wished I could just stay in this moment with Mara. I wanted to put a pause on all the hysteria that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

"I'm gonna go shower, and then I want those face masks, Queer Eye, and maybe some sushi or something and a download on your date," I groaned and sat up, rubbing my temples. Crying hard always gives me a major splitting headache. Between that and the hangover I rocked this morning, my poor head was not doing well.

"I'll get it all ready. Take your time, and holler if you need anything, okay?" Mara said, squeezing my hands and moving towards the kitchen. I padded towards the shower and looked down at the hand with Priya's number on it.

I would need to get my phone tomorrow and text her.

I needed to know what "deathwalker" means.

Additionally, I needed to figure out why, for the first time in a long time, I had this feeling that I was exactly where I need to be.



THE NEXT DAY, I picked up a new phone at the Apple store and got everything squared away so I was a functioning human being connected to society again. I had about a bajillion texts and missed calls from Mara, which made me smile. I'm damn lucky to have a friend like her.

Then there was Isaac, who had called and texted a bunch of times too. I promptly ignored and deleted them. He had *years* to talk to me about what was going on, and instead he led me on and lied to my face. He doesn't get a second more of my time.

So forty-eight hours post-breakup and I was already setting boundaries like the bad bitch I am. I unfollowed him on all social media platforms and deleted any pictures with him. This may seem harsh and dramatic, but when I'm done with something, I'm done. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Choices were made, and my decision was final. I didn't need unnecessary reminders popping up and giving my emotions a heart attack, when I could just as easily prevent them from doing so.

I felt like I had woken up from a love-induced haze, and I was no longer accepting this type of bullshit from him or anyone else. I felt like a phoenix reborn from fire and ash, ready to wholly embrace my inner badass.

I had cleaned out my apartment, throwing out most of his shit and packing the rest of it away. Mara said she would help take care of the "Isaac box." Damn, I'm so grateful to have her as my friend. She's like my shield of emotional armor as I piece my heart back together.

I had a lot of guilt for not telling Mara about what happened between me and Priya, even though I barely had words, or understanding, for what had occurred. I planned on getting more information ASAP, then letting Mara know everything. She's the one person in my life who I can always depend on, even in the darkest and weirdest of times. And honestly, if I just kept moving, I could avoid all unpleasant feelings until further notice, which was fine with me for the time being. Future me would be in for a rude awakening at some point, but that was a problem for another day. Until then, I'd excel at avoidance and hope the rock that permanently settled in my stomach would eventually erode away.

My parents were super concerned and worried when I told them the news about Isaac. They offered to stop by but I politely refused, saying

that Mara and I were deep into my healing journey and I would let them know if I needed anything. I love my parents, but they aren't always the most helpful with my emotional and physical well-being. They would do best by giving their support from afar.

I can handle the to-do lists. Getting shit done is my superpower. But I'm not so great at slowing down and processing things in the moment. My avoidant nature is my other superpower. So I would just keep rolling forward full steam ahead.

For now.

Priya had texted me, saying we should meet later in the week, so we made a plan for Friday. I was to meet her at her place at six o'clock, then we were going someplace where she could introduce me to her people and explain to me what I am. I'd also asked her to explain to me what she is and what the hell I was supposed to do about all of this.

These thoughts floated through my head as I sat down to word vomit in my journal. I looked around at my room and squinted at my gallery wall, wondering if old photos could help conjure up the memories I had shut down when I was younger. My room was big and open, and everything was white with clean lines. That didn't mean there weren't clothes everywhere but it meant that, for the most part, I liked modern things with crisp edges. So different from Priya's rich, dark, and multicolored place. Not sure why I was comparing my space to hers. My mind seemed to be wandering to thoughts of Priya a lot lately, which made sense, since she was the only one who genuinely knew what I am.

Gathering my thoughts back to the present moment, I turned to my journal and the page I had barely started. "Times I died" was scrawled across the top.

Very normal.

*Okay, I thought, tapping my chin with my pen. There was that time when I was five, and that boy clocked me with a piñata stick. And the time I may or may not have drowned on our family vacation in Hawaii when I was nine and got caught by a rip tide? Maybe? I fell down the stairs and cracked my skull open when I was ten. Or how about when I had that sledding accident at thirteen? Then, when I was fifteen, I fell out of a treehouse after making out with someone. Oops. That parasite I got from our Costa Rica trip when I was eighteen?*

I tallied my list up and, so far, I had six.

I wondered if other people had experiences like this, and why I'd always assumed it was normal to have death-defying adventures every few years or so. It's more likely that I hadn't emotionally processed any of it. Childhood trauma is fun like that. It always seems to come back around, even when you try really fucking hard to shove it down.

I was starting to lean towards no, people don't have things like this happen. I thought I was just very accident prone and unlucky. But in reality, I was too wrapped up in my own shit to actually notice that *none* of this is normal.

Even though I wasn't one-hundred-percent sure if I had *actually* died any of those times, I was pretty injured, or sick, and had to go to the hospital each time. It was technically plausible that those things could have killed me, and I do remember some weird dreams where I felt like I was there, but not really there. Maybe more out-of-body experiences? I couldn't exactly be sure. Not to mention, I had miraculously quick recovery times each time. At some point, though, I had become numb to it and just thought that was my body doing its regular thing.

Additionally, there totally could have been times in college when I drank myself to death. Not really my most shining moments. I also tended to avoid hospitals or anything medical when I graduated high school because they'd almost always comment on my weight. Even though my labs were always perfectly normal, they were always pressuring me to go on a diet. It had been an absolute dumpster fire for my mental and emotional health to go through that every time I was in the ER. So after I had turned eighteen, I said "fuck that," and went on a long journey to accept and love myself exactly as I am, not as society wants me to be. To move and nourish my body in ways that felt good, as opposed to ways that were supposed to make me look a certain way.

The scale can go fuck itself.

Needless to say, it's been a hot minute since I visited a hospital, and I really am not interested in going to another one any time soon.

I thought about calling my mom and asking her about my near-death experiences, but I felt like that would be sort of weird and out of the blue, and I didn't want to invite the questions that would inadvertently follow. Plus, I didn't know why it felt like it was important for me to know these things. I don't know what a deathwalker is or what the hell I'm doing, so no reason to get anyone else involved.



I did feel better after writing it down.

Honestly, it's a miracle I'm somewhat of a normal human being when I look back and see some of the shit I got into.

I bit my lip and laid back on my bed, drifting my eyes closed.

I needed Friday to be here now.

I glanced at my phone and checked it, hoping to see a text from Priya. But Isaac's name appeared on the screen instead.

**Isaac: I just want to know you're okay. You can't ignore me forever.**

"Watch me," I hissed, and deleted the message. Lincoln 2.0 would no longer be accepting bullshit, especially not from this bullshitter.

So I went back to my list, trying to forget that for some of those incidents, Isaac had been by my rock. Although now, I would never allow him a place next to me again.

**M**y energy was frazzled all week, like a live wire ready to explode in a sparkly, electric mess. The energy that consumed my body seemed to build until I finally arrived at Priya's apartment to get some answers, answers I didn't even know existed until just a week ago. Now that I knew they were real and tangible, I was hungry and desperate for them. I wanted to know who and what I am in this world. The anxiety building up in my body was also fueled by life without Isaac. He felt like a phantom limb. I knew he was gone and I was relieved to have cut him off, but I still hurt from his absence. It was confusing, missing him when I knew I shouldn't.

Priya had been relatively quiet since I got to her place. In reality, I didn't know her that well, so I guess I didn't really know how talkative she was regularly. But it wasn't an awkward silence. It was actually sort of comfortable.

By now, we were in the car driving to an unknown destination to talk to some people that could help explain this deathwalker thing. I was completely lost in my thoughts of grief, relief, and confusion that I didn't even notice when we rolled right up in front of Priya's bar. We stopped out front and she parked us right at the door.

"Uh this is your secret place? Also your bar is located at the very edge of Boystown?" I pressed my face to the window, letting the cold pull me back to reality. My apartment was nowhere near Boystown. How exactly I had walked all the way there the other night didn't make a damn bit of sense, but I was learning to live with the unexplainable these days. I filed

it away underneath the “Shit that’s Pretty Unbelievable, but Inevitably True” part of my brain.

Priya had mentioned that the bar was a lighthouse of sorts, calling to those who were like me. I still didn’t know very much of anything and at this point, everything was feasible, considering the events of the other night.

She reached over and wrapped a gloved hand around my knee, and squeezed it. “It is. Just trust me, Lincoln. All of this will make more sense real soon.” She got out of the car, and I looked to see where her hand just was, sort of missing the pressure of it.

I stepped out of the car and blinked against the snowfall, staring at the place where I had been killed literally a week ago. What the actual fuck is going on with my life right now?

“I wish I could say that I was freaked out. That would probably be the normal response, right? Instead I just feel anxious, which isn’t really that uncommon for me.” I tilted my head and stared at the spot where I’d died. Such an unassuming spot in the street that had actually set my life towards a really unexpected course.

I swallowed as Priya unlocked the heavy door of the bar.

“Get your ass inside before you catch hypothermia,” she teased, holding the door open for me. I laughed and it felt good to release some tension from my heart.

I walked into the darkness and realized that, when I was here the other night, I hadn’t noticed how beautiful and special this place is. It’s as if you’re transported to a world of magic, romance, and secrecy. The candles, gray wood, mirrors, etc....it all makes you feel like you’re safe, sexy, and warm.

Priya moved towards the bar, then passed it, heading towards a hallway. I assumed bathrooms, maybe a small kitchen, an office, or an employee space were this way, but she walked straight to the back. She laid her tattooed hand against a large black door that had no handle on it. She mumbled something that sounded like it was in another language. A small ray of light erupted from the cracks in the door before it swung open. I gasped.

“What the fuck was that?” I stared at her in awe and disbelief. Does this mean she’s magical? Does this mean *I’m* magical? This phenomenon was a game changer, for sure. My anxiety started to morph into

excitement, and I tried to contain my glee. My nerves danced happily underneath my skin, and I felt ready to bounce off the walls.

She laughed, her red lips splitting open to show a big smile. Today her hair is piled in a high ponytail above white ear warmers. She had gold eyeshadow on, and her long lashes look exceptionally dark and curled.

“A little bit of magic,” she said playfully. She gestured for me to walk through the door towards a dark staircase angling downwards, with wall sconces lighting the way. “Don’t worry. There aren’t any dangers in this chamber of secrets.”

I laughed loudly at that, earning a wicked grin from her.

“But seriously, are you a witch? Have I been missing out on magic my whole life? Because, honestly, I’m a little pissed that I’m just now finding out. Like, how fun would that have been as a kid? Really can’t believe that I’m in the presence of sorcery and that I, myself, may possess a little magic! Fuck, this is cool,” I said, calling behind me as I descended the stairs. Despite it being freezing outside, the passage was warm. It went down for quite some time, to another handleless door.

Priya was right behind me. We crowded the space at the bottom of the steps, and I was very aware of her body close to mine.

“Just wait, Lincoln. I think you’ll like what we tell you.” She placed her hand on the door, whispering words I didn’t understand—once again—before an expansive hallway appeared.

This looked like a bunker, with doors surrounding the sides, and fluorescent lights up above. It was all stone, with gray and masculine iron touches.

“Are you going to murder me down here? I listen to a lot of true crime so....” I looked around and wondered where the hell I was, and how it all fit underneath a bar.

Priya grabbed my hand in hers, her glove gone.

“No, love. Come on.” She tugged me down the hallway as I swiveled my head back and forth, wondering what each door held behind it. Priya was doing an excellent job of dodging my annoying questions and hilarious humor. But I trusted her to keep me safe so I figured, eventually, she would let me in on the secrets of what was happening in this wizard-like dungeon place. I glanced back at the door we came in through, but it was gone, nothing more than a hallway with doors lining either side.

“Uh...the door’s gone,” I said looking back at Priya’s sharp jawline.

“Don’t worry, you can still leave if you feel uncomfortable. Just let me know and I’ll take you back home. But I’ll warn you, we haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.” She winked, and I gripped her hand tighter.

She led me to a crossroads, where she took a left, then walked up to a door on the right. None of the doors had any doorknobs. None of them even had any markings on them.

“How do you know this is the right door? There are literally no labels.” I scanned it for any distinguishing features to show that it was different from the others. Does magic come with a special language? One that all the magicians know and study?

So many questions, yet none of them answered.

“The sight,” she said, tapping her temple with a short, manicured fingernail.

“You have it as well, love. You’ve just never been taught to use it. But we’ll show you.” She did the same thing a third time: whispered words and placed her hand on the door. Again, it swung open for her.

I wanted to fist pump the air, but refrained. I didn’t want to look like a total dork, but it’s fucking cool that I have a built-in magic language detector. I wondered how I could access it and what I could do with this new supernatural power.

I stepped inside, to a wide room that was filled with people. There were couches, tables, and computers lining the space. It was like one of those cool, hip offices you see on TV that you don’t think actually exists in real life, but evidently exists somewhere way above your pay grade. People were bustling around, and a man who has the same brown skin as Priya, with black hair, made eye contact with us as we walked in. Immediately, the door behind us disappeared. Why do they keep doing that? How the hell are you supposed to leave if you can’t go out the way you came in?

We were now plopped right in the middle of the work space. I looked around dumbly as the man strolled right up to us and others smiled at Priya.

“You made it! This is Lincoln?” he asked, turning his smile to me after he’d given Priya a quick hug. He has the same English accent as she does. He was incredibly tall and broad, with the same sharp eyes and features as Priya. He was dressed casually in dark, tight jeans, a white sweater, and brown boots. “I’m Priya’s older brother, Emir. It’s nice to meet you,

Lincoln.” He held out his hand and I shook it. He had a strong, reassuring grip.

“Yeah, you too. Exactly what is this?” I gestured to the space around me. I was ready to burst at the seams with all the questions floating around my brain, but I wanted to keep it cool as long as possible.

“I know you must be a bit confused, so let’s go somewhere quiet to chat,” he said, his smile was just as mesmerizing as Priya’s. She gave me a reassuring nod as we maneuvered around all the people until we made it to a glass office. There was a glass fireplace that had leather couches surrounding it. A huge black desk occupied one corner, a minibar sat in the other corner, and a large conference table in another.

We settled on three separate couches, all facing inwards around a coffee table. Priya immediately reached for some tea and kicked off her boots. I took the couch on her right, and her brother took the one on the left. Who the hell has three couches in their office? What sort of organization is this? I grabbed some coffee, wondering if I had legitimately stepped into another world. I could get on board with magic, but I wasn’t sure my brain would be able to handle a multiverse conversation.

Emir crossed his ankle on his thigh and draped his arms across the back of the couch. I opened my mouth to say something when the man from the other night came in.

“Grey!” Priya said, reaching out her arms for a hug as he bent down and embraced her quickly, before settling next to Emir, tucking himself underneath his arm. Emir squeezed his arm around him and planted a light kiss on Grey’s temple.

*Well, they’re cute as hell.*

My heart clenched, as I was reminded that I am single and more than a little broken from Isaac. I pushed the sadness down and took a swig of the deliciously hot coffee.

“So, you’re probably wondering why you’re here,” Emir said slowly.

There was a warmth and easiness to him and this room. It felt safe, welcoming in a way I didn’t really understand. I kicked my own shoes off and shrugged out of my coat like Priya, then crossed my legs, settling against the back of the couch.

“Yes I am, but honestly, I’m a little more concerned with why I’m not extremely freaked out about...this. As in, I’m freaking out about the

possibility of me having superpowers in, like, a good way. Seriously, this is so fucking cool! But it's not unbelievable, if that makes sense....," I said, trailing off at the end. "But I'm guessing you've got some answers for me? I mean, I have about a bajillion questions flying through my brain but I don't even know where to start, so I feel like that means *you* should start." I eyed him, Grey, and Priya.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more, love. We have to be careful where we talk about these things, especially with all the information we're about to share." Priya offered an apologetic gaze.

"What do you mean?" I asked, leaning towards her. I mean, in any book or movie ever, magic is always a secret, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised. But how do you actually keep something like this under wraps? It always seems impossible, and silly even, but I suppose everyone has their reasons.

"Humans don't know we exist," Priya started.

*I fucking knew it.*

"We have to keep it that way. It would cause too much chaos and unrest if we were exposed," she said slowly, as if thinking really hard about each word that came out of her mouth.

"Are we not human?" I tried to wrap my head around what she was saying. I felt like I had just opened a book and started in the middle, without really understanding the full plot. I mean I feel pretty human.

"Not exactly. We are gatekeepers. And you, we suspect, are a deathwalker. We keep the balance of the earth, or mortal realm, and the afterlife," Emir said, tilting his head and waiting to see my reaction.

I took another sip of coffee, trying to keep my face neutral as I attempted to gain some more grounding and control over my thoughts. I looked at the black liquid in my cup, then up at Priya, whose gaze was hopeful.

"Okay well, why don't you start at the beginning?" I asked, smiling. "Don't leave anything out."

"Alright Lincoln, welcome to a whole new world," Emir said. He then began to unravel the mysteries that had plagued my twenty-five years of existence, and I finally felt free.

“**T**he world we live and breathe in every day is the mortal realm. Then there’s the afterlife, or afterworld. Many religions, texts, and even people have their own opinions about the afterlife. We know it as a place all souls move to after their physical body perishes. This has been the way of the world since the beginning of time. Once your physical body leaves you, you move to the afterlife, where your spirit is free to find peace,” he explained.

That felt nice. No one had ever described the afterlife like that. It actually sounded pleasant, as opposed to horrific.

“Some have to go through a cleansing if their soul has been corrupted on Earth, but they are born pure and whole. The mortal realm creates the cracks that cause humans to act heinously towards one another. It is a learned behavior, so to speak. Additionally, sometimes people get lost on their way to the afterworld and can’t find their way back on their own. So then, they get spit back into the mortal realm.” He continued on. “Thus, when the world came to be, gatekeepers were made. They were human for the most part, those with the gift of sight, heightened physical abilities, and a little magic. Some possessed other abilities unique to family lineages as well, or were simply blessed by the queen of the afterlife herself.”

“We are gatekeepers,” Emir said, gesturing towards himself, Grey, and Priya. I nodded, not wanting to break the story but secretly wanting to scream, “I knew it!” Instead, I just continued to bob my head and sip my coffee, like this wasn't the coolest thing I had ever heard.



“With the ability of sight, we can see all things from the afterlife. Some humans are born with a semblance of sight, and that’s how a lot of those ghost-hunting shows come about, because those humans genuinely do see things they cannot explain.” He laughed to himself slightly, and I grinned.

“Good to know *Ghostbusters* wasn’t a total lie,” I mumbled.

They all chuckled at that, then Emir prattled on.

“Our magic helps us stay hidden from the rest of the world. Death is hard for humans to come to terms with, so it’s essential that we don’t share what we are. It could also cause more cracks into someone’s soul, and the mortal realm does enough corrupting as is that we try to stay as unbiased as possible for the safety of the souls.” He looked pained for a moment as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. He quickly masked his anguish and straightened his spine.

“There is a large misconception that death is divided into heaven and hell, when in reality, the afterlife is a place where spirits are free from the woes of a physical body. That relief, that peace...it looks different for everyone. It’s essential that we take the utmost care with the souls, spirits, and ghosts that are trapped on Earth. We will go into what the differences are later.” He smiled at me as I started to open my mouth, then shut it, as if he knew that’s exactly what I was going to ask. I needed to write down all my questions so I wouldn’t forget anything. But right now, I was just trying to absorb all that Emir said to me, and cement it into my brain.

“As gatekeepers, we’re technically employed through GK, Inc. and Society. It allows us to move freely and do our job, while being provided for. Some humans do know about us just because of blended families, but they are sworn to secrecy. Our council takes extreme precautions to ensure the safety and sanity of the world.

“I run the United States branch. All those doors you saw earlier are ways for the regional and local branches throughout the country to connect with one another. Headquarters is here, and we have powerful magic to reach one another. Grey and Priya are two of my top GKs. Priya is in charge of finding oddities in the mortal realm, through the bar. It has strong magic that acts as a signal to call all things touched by the afterlife to come find it, even if they don’t know why they’re there.

“We have field teams that actively look and research for lost spirits. We have beacons that act as safe havens to help us move an extreme

number of souls towards the afterlife. We have teams everywhere that death tends to linger, like hospitals or nursing homes, in order to ensure their safe passage to the afterlife. If trapped souls are not guided there, or if they get lost, they can turn into something that is not good for either world. So our jobs are time-sensitive.”

My head spun with all this new information, but I was desperate for more. What did he mean by souls changing into something that was bad?

“So what am I? You just said it was dangerous for souls to die and not move to the afterlife. Am I dangerous? Am I going to turn into a zombie? Because Priya already told me I wasn’t, and I really don’t love eating human flesh with my coffee,” I said, trying to understand how I fit in. Nothing had come up thus far about how I can die and come back to life. That felt like a red flag to me. Not to mention the fact that my healing seemed to be instantaneous as of late. I really wanted to know if my magical powers can do other cool shit, like levitate objects or make me invisible. It was truly a child’s dream to have invisibility.

“You’re not dangerous, love. You have a unique ability,” Priya said.

“You’re a deathwalker. As GKs, we’re not permitted to the afterlife without a special invitation. It keeps balance in our worlds. As a deathwalker, you’re able to move across realms freely, but in order for you to move to the afterworld, you have to leave your corporeal body behind while you’re there. Deathwalkers used to be liaisons between the realms to keep peace and harmony, almost like ambassadors. Deathwalkers, when trained, can control when they leave their bodies to enter the afterlife. Typically, they don’t encounter so many near-death experiences throughout their lives that trigger their powers though. You seem to be a special case in that regard,” Emir said. Priya must have told him that I have a history of death-defying experiences that were a little fuzzy in my memory. But at least I have a semblance of an explanation now.

“In addition, you also have all the gifts of GKs, but with the added bonus of free admission to the afterlife. However, we haven’t seen a deathwalker in quite some time....” Emir started to trail off like he didn’t know exactly how to explain what was next.

“What happened?” I asked. I needed to know. I untangled my legs and placed my elbows on my knees. “Tell me.” I was suddenly scared of what he would say. Every bit of information was filling in the pieces of the larger puzzle that is now my life.

“Well...er...we haven’t seen one in almost a decade. Active ones were called to the afterlife one day and never came back, then their deathwalker lineage and power seemed to stop. The leaders of the gatekeepers stopped receiving invitations to the afterlife, and those last few who did never came back.” Emir twisted his long fingers together. A heaviness settled in the room, like the Grim Reaper himself sat next to us.

Greyson reached out one of his pale hands and wrapped it around Emir’s anxious ones. Emir smiled at him and seemed to relax as Grey’s other hand brushed hair out of his eyes.

My heart clenched again at the love and intimacy in the gesture. It was sweet, and I hoped that one day I would be able to find something like that again, something with a better foundation than what Isaac and I had.

“Emir replaced our aunt as head of the branch ten years ago. He was one of the youngest to ever ascend to the position. She was the last one who was invited by the queen, and never came back,” Priya said, looking at her brother with love and empathy.

“Everything happened very fast. All of a sudden the deathwalkers fell dead, like a spell had been cast on their lives, and they never came back to their bodies. Time in the afterlife works differently than it does on Earth. Minutes here are days there. And because the bodies of deathwalkers can only be a sustaining vessel for so long, their bodies became unfit for their souls,” Priya said sadly.

I couldn’t remember anything happening ten years ago where tons of people had dropped dead, but I would guess that they had ways of covering things up.

“How long can they, uh, be a proper vessel?” I found myself whispering.

“A few hours simply existing, much longer if they are properly preserved in one of our safe houses with medical equipment, but we were unprepared to retrieve all the bodies. Usually they prepare for the journey beforehand so they’re safely guarded by our medical teams,” Priya stated.

*How many died?* I couldn’t bring myself to ask that question, but I absolutely needed to know the answer to my next one.

“So I’m the last deathwalker?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around the fact that I am one of a kind, an oddity that simply exists, while others have fallen dead before me. It didn’t exactly provide me any comfort.

“You are the first one we have encountered in ten years, and we have searched for deathwalkers in those families that were once part of the lineage. Before, we were able to see them with our sight. A haze of death would normally surround you, but you don’t have that for some reason. Deathwalkers typically follow a lineage. As in, it’s hereditary. So you appear to be a bit of an anomaly in that regard as well,” Emir said.

“We’ve been trying to figure out what caused all this ever since it happened, but we cannot access the afterworld at this time without a deathwalker or an invitation. We’ve had an influx of trapped souls over the past decade who’ve gotten lost and become very violent. Before, we never had to use force with them, but now we do. It was always an option for us to use magically bonded weapons, however, that practice has nearly become extinct in the last century or so. It’s almost like the connection between the realms is frayed, not functioning the way it has for thousands of years. I worry that, eventually, we’ll be overwhelmed and the realms will bleed together, which would cause a rip in humanity that I’m not sure we could recover from,” Emir confessed seriously. Silence hung in the air, and it felt like a thick tension settled around us as those last few words sunk in.

They all sat quietly, looking at me like I might scream or explode.

This was serious, save-the-world-or-die shit. And somehow, I ended up right in the middle of it. Magic doesn’t seem as exciting anymore. It seems dangerous and heavy.

“You said I should be able to move between realms on command? I’ve only ever experienced one full true out-of-body death experience to date, and it was the other night. I think...I think I have died before and come back, but it was always because of some accident, never on purpose. And I don’t think I have the sight because I’ve never seen anything ghostly before,” I said, looking at them honestly.

There were holes in my own story and I wasn’t sure how it all fit together, but I knew that there were answers somewhere, and that they were probably my best bet at understanding all of this. But I really wasn’t sure what to do with the information that I might be some type of last hope hero. They didn’t say it but I could feel it in the air like static electricity. The label *deathwalker* is something special. They needed a deathwalker right now to provide answers, not more questions.

“I think you need proper training. I think your body wants to function as a deathwalker, but something is blocking it. I wonder if you’ve been protected for some reason, since we know of no others. This is all speculation, and we don’t exactly have all the answers right now,” Priya finally said, her gold eyes simmering and her mouth set in a hard line.

“You said something about knowing that I’m restless, and not irrational?” I asked, tilting my head to the side. “Is that because I’m in my mid-twenties, or is this a genuine part of being a deathwalker?”

“Typically, deathwalkers are prone to physical ailments of cognitive dissonance and anxiety because your nature wants you to function as it was designed, fluctuating between realms. The lack of doing so creates a reserve of untapped energy in your body, and often dissatisfaction when only the human part is engaged.”

Does that mean I can blame my anxiety on being this mythical creature that apparently can visit the afterlife whenever I want? I smiled thinking that my therapist would absolutely not accept this as an explanation for my anxiety.

“Okayyy,” I said, drawing it out. “What exactly does all this mean, in terms of moving forward?” I asked, exhaling slowly. This was a lot to comprehend, and I had no idea what the next steps would be now that I had a better understanding of what was going on with myself, and them.

“I want to offer you a job, Lincoln. GK Inc. is a real company that is said to specialize in technology. We would hire you as a marketing specialist for cover but, in reality, we would train you, provide for you, and protect you. We hope, in return, you could help us connect the dots of what happened so long ago and help us restore balance to life and death once again,” Emir said, smiling warmly and relaxing back into the soft leather with Grey next to him. He said it like it was no big deal, but it felt like a very big deal to me.

“We need someone like you, Lincoln,” Grey said. It was the first time he spoke since the conversation had started. He seemed like the rock that was keeping Emir tied to the earth.

“So what does it actually mean to, uh...you know, help souls move to the afterlife?” I asked, trying to find the right words.

“When we find them, we connect with them to understand why they’re lost or trapped. When we find the reason, we can resolve it with spells, with actions, all sorts of things. Each soul is different. Then when they’re

ready, we guide them to a place where the veil between realms is thin enough to step through. The veil will either accept or reject them. If it rejects them, we have not done our job. Some are easy fixes and others take a bit more time, but usually, none take more than a day or two,” Priya said easily.

I stared at her and continued to look for the energy and emotion in me to call “bullshit” on all of them, except I knew that what they were saying was true. It was like my body and brain had been waiting for this explanation my whole life. Hearing it unlocked something inside me and placed the last puzzle piece in place, completing the picture.

“I don’t know why, but I believe all of it. I feel it in my body. Like something inside me just woke up and said, ‘Thank god you finally figured this shit out because we were getting kind of worried,’” I said, trying to sound casual. But I felt different, like I finally understood what had always been in front of me. I also felt anxious because, if I’m the last deathwalker, or the only one they know of...would I actually be able to help them? I wanted to at least try. This felt like something important, like it was meant to be from the first moment I stumbled towards Priya’s bar.

“Yes. I will work here. For this. I want to help,” I said, knowing in the back of my brain that this was what I had been searching for. No wonder nothing had worked before. My life had been leading me towards this, and I just didn’t know it. Too bad it had taken such a damn long time to find it, but I was glad I made it.

Priya reached over and grabbed my hand.

“Thank you, Lincoln,” she smiled wide and I nearly melted.

“Okay well, then you’ll start next month! Grey will get your information so he can send you all the paperwork and ways to explain your cover to your human friends and loved ones. You can only tell the people closest to you what you are and what we are, and you will need to clear it with us before you do so. That way, you have enough time to wrap up your current job and tell your friends and family about the cover, and it will give you some time to process all that you’ve heard here,” Emir said, standing up and smiling at me and Priya.

A month seemed like too soon and too far away, all at the same time.

He walked around towards the couch and held out his hand for me to shake. I barely reached his chest but I stood up straight and shook his hand firmly.

“Welcome aboard, deathwalker,” he said, winking at me.

“Happy to be here, gatekeeper,” I replied, hoping this playful banter would lighten the mood.

“Now we celebrate!” Priya said, pulling me away from her brother and laughing in her bright and husky way.

I felt the pain of Isaac’s betrayal and my midlife crisis ease a little, like the rough edges of the past week were starting to smooth out. I laughed too, and let Priya drag me towards the door.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, considering what happened last time you drank?” Priya teased after our fourth or fifth shot of tequila. I’m not great at keeping track.

“You’re bursting my fun bubble,” I said, slurring a bit and poking her in the shoulder. This was fun drinking. Celebratory drinking. Not drowning my sorrows in sadness drinking like when we first met.

We were sitting at “Deathwalker Tavern” and someone else from the Society was serving tonight. Vera, a pretty Asian-American woman with bleach blonde hair striped with pink and a hoop through her septum. She was animated and fun, chatting with us easily and pouring drinks like they were going out of style.

The place had that same magical, romantic feeling again that transported me to a different world. In some ways, it *was* another world, especially after all I’d learned tonight.

“Gimme all the tequila!” I threw my hands in the air as Priya laughed and slung her arm around me.

“Okay love, one more and then I gotta cut you off, okay?” She smiled, her gold eyes twinkling.

“I think I’m lost in your eyes,” I said, holding her face in between my hands.

She stilled, her mouth quivered, and her pupils dilated. It was like her energy drew me in, pulling me closer every time I looked at her. I didn’t know if that had ever happened with anyone else before.



“I could say the same to you.” Her fingertips brushed my temple as she tucked my hair behind my ear. I don’t know how long I stayed there holding her face, but I really didn’t want to let her go.

“Last round, ladies!” Vera’s voice snapped me out of my drunken obsession with Priya’s face, which admittedly was weird, and I should probably stop doing weird things like that. I grabbed my shot and handed the other to her.

“What should we toast to?” I asked, looking at her intensely again.

“New beginnings.” She clinked her glass to mine and we shot the clear liquid down. That was what I needed. My heart was still raw but I felt optimistic about what this new future would hold. Deep down I knew grieving would take time. For the wedding, for Isaac, for the loss of my previous reality. But I was feeling excited for better days ahead.

Then my thoughts traveled back to how Grey and Emir looked at one another. Suddenly, my small shining light of optimism fizzled out, and I felt edgy and vulnerable again.

“Emir and Grey seem deeply in love,” I blurted out, letting the words fall flat.

“They are,” Priya said, raising one sculpted, dark brow. No judgment, just curiosity.

“I thought Isaac and I were, but I don’t think you lie to the person you love. I think he never looked at me like that because he was hiding a lot in our relationship. He said what I wanted to hear, but he never actually believed it.” The words tumbled out of my mouth. “I wish I would have realized it sooner. But at the same time, I’m glad I know the truth now.” Rage and sadness filled Priya’s eyes.

“I think people can be cowards in love, which is no real love at all,” she said carefully, scanning my face. “Do you want to be with him anymore?” she questioned, pinning me with her gaze. It was a valid question. Lots of people get back together with their exes. I mean, hell, Isaac and I did that a couple of times. But now I knew that our relationship would never have a place in my life again.

“No. Not now. Not ever,” I confessed, truly meaning every word.

A few moments of silence followed. I scanned her face and ended up looking at her painted red lips. Do I normally look at people’s lips? I didn’t think so. So why was I doing that to Priya?

“Let’s get you home, Linc, my love.” Her words snapped my eyes back up to hers, and she gave a small, wicked grin that made my insides turn warm.

“I don’t...I don’t want to go home and talk to Mara about today. I don’t know how to explain it to her. I know I’m not supposed to tell her, and I’m just not sure how to do that. I tell Mara everything,” I said.

She’s my best friend. I wanted to spill my guts to her but I hardly knew anything at all. And Emir said there were procedures in place to protect the mortal realm. I was not about to be the first deathwalker to destroy the human race. Plus, I didn’t want to endanger Mara or make a confusing mess out of things. I would tell her the truth through the proper channels but I wasn’t ready, by any means, to do it right now.

“Can I, uh...can I go home with you?” I asked, hoping she would say yes so I could collect my thoughts on all that had happened in my life since I met her. Priya felt steady and calm. Maybe spending more time with her would allow that energy to rub off on me and I wouldn’t be so damn nervous to face Mara.

Priya did that thing again where she looks into your soul, and finally said, “Of course. Let’s go. Bye, Vera,” she said, waving to her friend. Vera flashed a smile while she poured more drinks.

For the second time in a week, I spent the night at Priya’s. It felt oddly normal to go home with her.



FOR THE NEXT MONTH, I wrapped up all my social media marketing clients and told my family and friends that I’d gotten a new exciting job as a marketing specialist at this cool, innovative tech company: GK Inc. Everyone was excited and asked all the typical new job questions, *except* for Mara.

“What are you going to be doing?”

“How did you find this opportunity?”

“Are you excited?”

“What, exactly, does this tech company do?”

The document Emir sent me covered everything, and it was a breath of fresh air to have it all done for me. I’d been spending quite a bit of time

with Priya, peppering her with questions and asking her to tell me stories about gatekeeper history and the afterlife.

I had also been trying to figure out how to tell Mara what was going on. I had gotten their full permission to share it with her, but I wasn't really ready to explain it yet. She was happy for my new job but I could tell she was a little skeptical, and knew something was off. I mean, she knows everything about me, and I was acting very weird and avoidant, which was a sure sign that something was up.

I mean, first off, I hate corporate work. Like, truly hated it with a vengeance when I did it a few years back. It was also a bit fishy that I was suddenly pumped for a position at a tech company, when she knew damn well I was the least tech savvy human on the planet. There were so many things that seemed sketchy, and Mara's great at sniffing out bullshit.

Oddly, the part of me that accepted all of this seemed to overshadow the part of me that felt broken and hurt by my breakup. It was like I'd begun a new life after that singular event, and this new life fit in a way my old one never did. It wasn't to say that I wasn't grieving my life before but rather, I was coming to terms with fact that it wasn't a life I wanted anymore. I wanted this new life. This felt like my purpose, my destiny.

I could tell Mara was suspicious as hell about how I was handling everything. I would find her watching me while I was singing or dancing around the kitchen, like she was waiting for me to spontaneously combust into tears and collapse onto the floor. I was only a little pouty when I saw cute couples on the street now. I tried to hide my look of disdain by turning away or quickly walking by them, which I felt was a great amount of growth, all things considered.

Above all, I felt relief. Relief and calm, knowing that this is what I was supposed to be doing and everything else before had just been a buildup to it.

Did I think I was ready to be this great hero between the realms? Hell no!

But I knew that I could help. I wanted to find my sense of purpose and discover what made me, well...me. It felt like I was settling deeper into myself.

It was the Sunday night before my first day on the "job" with Priya, and tomorrow we planned to work on why my sight wasn't functioning the way it should. Apparently, we'd be meeting with some elders who were

experts in helping young gatekeepers hone their sight skills. I was excited and nervous, like genuine new job vibes.

Mara was in the kitchen and I was reading a book on my iPad when an email notification popped up. It was from one of the wedding vendors. I waited for a black hole of heartache in my stomach to appear.

It didn't.

I couldn't even fathom how, a month ago, I was planning to marry Isaac. I had ignored all his calls and texts since then. Even if we were still together, I never could've explained all this to him. And I didn't want to. I was done having people in my life who I couldn't be completely honest with, and who couldn't be honest with me.

I should've been more upset.

I should've become a puddle on the floor.

But I couldn't even bring myself to muster up that emotion. The Lincoln before, who was blindly in love, simply didn't exist anymore because something else had taken root.

"Hey, you know, I don't think I need you to take care of the wedding vendor stuff. I can do it," I said, calling over my shoulder to Mara, where I heard something clatter to the counter.

"Seriously?" she asked in disbelief.

I turned around, and she was standing in her typical attire: a crop tank with leggings and slippers. Her hair was fully natural tonight, creating a halo of dark corkscrew curls around her face.

"Uh, yeah. Seriously." I tugged on my own pigtail braids.

"Okay. I have been waiting for you to tell me what the hell is going on with you, but like, are you okay? Because you seem...*too* okay? I'm here for your healing in whatever way you need to do that but Linc, you literally called off your wedding a little over a month ago and you're acting like nothing happened. You're singing and dancing around the kitchen like you're in love again or something!" She planted her hands on her hips. I didn't want to lie to her. I knew this needed to be the moment I told her what was actually going on.

Fuck. I was really not prepared for this.

Emir had sent over so many resources and a ton of information. But they did not send over a brochure about how to completely flip your best friend's world upside down with talk of the afterlife and your ability to die and come back.

“Linc?” she asked, her mouth turned down in a frown and her hazel eyes filled with concern.

“I need to tell you something about my new job,” I said, scanning her face.

“Literally, what does that have to do with your relationship status?” she asked.

“Just sit your ass down and listen,” I said, grinning at her.

“Fine. You don't need to be a bossy bitch.” She shuffled over to sit across from me on our sectional.

“Okay. I don't...I don't exactly know how to say this, but um...I died the other night?” I said it like a question because I was desperately trying to figure out where to begin. How do you delicately destroy someone's reality?

“Like, emotionally?” she asked, confused.

“No, like literally. I was hit by a taxi.”

Her mouth dropped open. “But you're alive.” She spoke slowly, like I had grown two pink horns out of my head.

“Yes, I am a deathwalker.” Then I started into everything that Emir had told me.

She just sat there, eyes wide, listening to me the whole time before I finished with, “So yeah. I sort of feel like who I was before doesn't exist, and when I came back to my body that day I left behind who I was before. I don't know how to explain it, but it's like that was Part One of my life and this is Part Two. Almost like my life is, like, its own book duology. And book one is over. It doesn't have a hold on me anymore.”

She looked at me and started laughing.

“Only you would explain it like that, Linc. For the record, I actually believe you. You had way too many close calls as a kid and sometimes, I swear to god, when we went out in college, you actually did die. *I* nearly died myself sometimes from a heart attack because of it. So weirdly, this makes sense. I accept you as is and love you no matter what, so even if you *are* lying or hallucinating or something, I accept it. Even though I don't think you are.” She reached out her hand and placed it on my thigh.

“Thank you for telling me. I'm just glad your weird mood isn't because you killed and buried Isaac outside of our apartment building because honestly, that would make me want to sing and dance through the

kitchen too. And I would've been pissed that you waited this long to tell me and didn't ask me to help you bury the body." she said, shrugging.

This time I burst out laughing.

"Okay, no one is getting murdered here. We are not becoming a story on someone's crime podcast. But I'm glad you know now. I wanted to tell you as soon as I found out, I just didn't know how and honestly, I don't know that much. But I feel like this is what I'm supposed to be doing, like everything else before just didn't make sense in my life, and now it does," I said, scrunching up my brows. "But you can't tell anyone. This is top secret shit. I cannot be the one responsible for spilling the beans on a secret that has been around since the earth began, okay?" I eyed her sternly.

"I know, babe. Your secrets are always safe with me," she said, coming over for a big hug. "I knew you were destined for big things. Who knew it was to practically star in your own version of the *Walking Dead*?!" She laughed, pulling me tight.

"I am *not* a zombie!" I said, squealing and trying to wrestle out of her vice grip.

"If you go for my brains, I will kill you," she said, pulling away and giggling as I grabbed one of the pillows and smacked her upside the head.

"Fuck you!" I said, as she slammed a pillow in my face and we erupted into laughter.

I was practically fizzling with energy when I met Priya at the bar, and we headed to the GK headquarters.

“What do you call this place? Because I just keep calling it a *lair*, like I’m in a Marvel movie or something,” I said, as she guided us through the corridors. “And how the hell do you know how to navigate this shit?” I gestured to the heavy black doors in the hallway surrounding us. Excitement hummed through my body.

Priya had given me some information, but not a ton. She said a lot of it I would be learning soon, from the experts who taught her. I had been whining and pleading with her the past month for any scrap of information.

“You can call it a *lair*. I think it’s cute. But the official name is the GK Directory Hall,” she said with a laugh and a swish of her high ponytail. Her dark cheeks were still a little pink from the cold, and she wore high-waisted maroon pants with a black turtleneck and silver combat boots. She had silver chains wrapped around her chest, almost like a vest.

Who knew chains were so fashionable?

“And my sight shows me what door is what. They’re all labeled accordingly. You just can’t see it yet, love.” She flashed a smile between dark purple lips.

I wondered why people don’t use *love* more often in an English accent because, honestly, it makes me feel like a royal princess or something. My toes curl every time she uses it, and my belly flutters in a weird way. I tried not to dwell on it too much.

After a few turns, we arrived at another nondescript door. Priya paused and squared her shoulders. She's even taller than normal in her combat boots. I looked up at her expectantly.

"We're going to the Canadian office today to meet with Taeler. He'll know how to help with your sight. And he'll explain the hierarchy of afterlife beings so you can identify them when your sight is trained. This door goes straight to his office, and he's waiting for us. You ready?" She laid her tattooed hand against the door.

"Yes," I smiled broadly. I placed my hand on top of hers and it emitted warmth.

"I want to feel it, the magic," I said, looking at her. Something swam behind her golden eyes, and her gaze didn't leave mine as words tumbled out of her mouth in a caress. It's a beautiful language that I don't understand. Her hand heated up, and mine tingled as the door swung inward.

"Let's go," she said, clearing her throat.

I walked through first, into a large office that looked almost identical to Emir's. There was a tall man with dark brown skin and dark, close-cropped hair sitting behind a desk. He smiled broadly as we stepped in. He got up and walked around the desk, reaching for Priya.

"Darling, how lovely to see you!" he said, wrapping her in a hug that oozed warmth and familiarity. Priya seems to know everyone, and they all greet her like she's a breath of fresh air, which is exactly how I feel when I'm around her too.

"You must be Lincoln, nice to meet you." He extended his hand towards me. He was dressed in a professional three-piece navy suit, which stretched over his broad shoulders and tall frame.

"Thank you for having me," I said, shaking his hand firmly.

"Please sit." He motioned towards the couches, all facing inward around a fireplace, almost a carbon copy of Emir's office. Damn, the heads of the branches sit nice and cozy during working hours. Just like before, there was coffee, tea, and water in the middle of a glass table nestled in between the sofas.

"I was very interested to see who our new deathwalker is. Especially since you have not experienced the sight," he commented, his dark eyes connecting to mine. There was no judgment in the words, simply curiosity. Priya had mentioned that Emir and everyone else was trying to play it cool



with me. They didn't want to overwhelm me by poking and prodding too much. Taeler's response was no different. But I wanted answers just as much as they did. I was ready to finally take steps to understand what, exactly, my story is.

I had no idea how to dress for my first day so I opted for black jeans, a red silk shirt, and black velvet knee-high boots paired with a long white coat, and I wrestled my dark wavy hair into a low bun. I felt fine about it when I had met Priya, but felt underdressed when I saw Taeler wearing a suit. I tried not to fidget under his gaze or let my anxiety settle in my chest.

"Hope I'm not a disappointment," I teased. Priya gently caressed my hand.

"Not at all. So first things first, I just want to confirm some information, then we can get started!" He took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, placing his arms across his chest. "You haven't seen any demons, wraiths, souls, spirits, or ghosts before?" he questioned.

My mind went blank.

"Uh, no. I mean, I don't think so? I actually don't really know what the differences are between any of those." Emir had said I would learn, but I was still ignorant about what those labels genuinely meant.

"Ah, of course. Well, let's start there, shall we? When a human is born, they have a pure soul. It's the most uncontaminated form of being. Think of a soul as the middle ground. It's often a white or transparent illusion, which can look partly human, or more like a smoky ball of energy. Ghosts are more corporeal; they're stuck in between here and the afterlife, so they maintain a human shape without a physical body. Spirits are the other side of souls. You become a spirit right before you're ready to find eternal rest."

I nodded, making mental notes of all the details.

"Wraiths are ghosts that have been trapped too long and can become violent. You can tell because they have dark tendrils around them, as if they're partly light but mostly dark. Demons are what become of corrupted souls that cannot be saved, healed, or find peace. The mortal realm has caused too much irreparable harm for them to find peace." He sighed loudly then, like this topic truly saddened him.

"They can be deformed and monster-like or as human-looking as anyone else. They're inherently dangerous due to the fact that they cannot

rest. They feed off the fear and torment of those on Earth. There's a special prison in the afterlife to contain them so they don't destroy the other souls during their eternal rest. But, occasionally, they cross over to the mortal realm and they must be sent back because we cannot kill them. They are bound to eternal restlessness and suffering due to their malicious nature," he said seriously.

"So the hierarchy of good beings to scary beings would be: spirits, souls, ghosts, wraiths, then demons?" I asked, trying to make sure I had all the details straight.

"Precisely." He smiled at me.

"When you have your sight trained, you will inherently know which is which, almost like the knowledge is a part of you," Priya explained further.

"But I thought you said most things could be saved and find peace? Isn't it sort of unfair that demons aren't saved, since they were originally a pure soul? Is there no way for them to be redeemed?" I asked.

"You have to want to find harmony and balance at the end of your life. Demons are those who don't. They have chosen to live this way because they refuse to do the work to return to their pure form. They don't think they have committed any wrongdoings, or they think that their actions on Earth were justified," Priya said softly.

"So what's the breakdown here? Do most people rest peacefully, or do we have a ton of demons, wraiths, and ghosts hanging around?" I inquired.

"Most of the ones we see are souls, ghosts, or the occasional wraith. We try to get to the ghosts before they become wraiths, and souls usually just need some help, as they can sometimes get confused and disoriented. Few have ever dealt with a demon, and that was a long time ago. Spirits aren't in the mortal realm because they are so close to eternal rest in the afterlife," Priya said, looking down as if hiding some sort of pain the memories brought up. Her eyes flickered to Taeler, who kept a neutral expression. I made a mental note to ask her about it later.

"I was told that, most of the time, they aren't violent. Is that true? Or is it because there aren't that many demons and wraiths running around, so violence isn't usually needed?" I asked.

"Yes. Most of the time they aren't violent. But wraiths and demons can be dangerous, which is why all gatekeepers are equipped with spelled

weapons. You'll get to choose one that you can easily conceal or wear, like I wear my chains." She waved toward the chains wrapped around her body.

"We hope you won't ever need to actually fight, but it's become customary to teach combat and weaponry now, since things have gotten more aggressive in the last decade. There are special task forces deployed to deal with particularly egregious demons," she said quietly, averting her eyes from mine.

"I'm on one of those task forces, but I haven't been called in a while. Usually, it depends on where they appear and who is closest." Priya crossed her legs and sat back on the dark leather couch.

"Your chains are actually weapons? I thought they were just, like, your signature style or something. And why am I not surprised that you're on the special ops team?" I flashed her a wicked smile. How is it possible that Priya keeps getting even more extraordinary?

"You will learn all of the ins and outs of the GK in time, Lincoln. Now that you know a little more, let's see about this sight." Taeler moved over on the couch and patted the space next to him.

"Come sit."

I settled next to him and took a deep breath. Suddenly, I was a bit nervous. Things would be different after this. In fact there was truly no going back now.

"Please, close your eyes. I'm going to rest my fingers on your temples. Is that all right?" He looked at me gently and I nodded, glancing over at Priya who had moved a little closer to us. She winked at me.

My eyes fluttered shut, and I felt his fingertips rest on my skin.

"Okay Lincoln, I'm going to send some magic through your mind. You might feel tingling or warming, but it shouldn't be painful. In three... two...one..." Heat spread through my forehead and I heard a *whoosh* as magic slammed into my brain and my eyes flew open, but I didn't see Taeler.

I saw my life.

It rolled by me like a movie at super speed. At my birth, a cloaked figure pressed their hands to my forehead and whispered something incoherent. Light erupted around me, then everything settled. Things moved quickly and I felt all of the moments like I was reliving them once again. Some happy, some painful, and in each one I saw *them*.

Ghosts, souls, spirits, even the occasional demon. They followed me around like lost pets. Sometimes they tried to communicate, but I never actually saw them. It was like I had a weird buffer around me that prevented them from actually making true contact. My eyes seemed to look right through them, as if they didn't exist at all.

One day there, the next gone—a constant ebb and flow of undetectable energy. A few tried to hurt me, and some managed to break through the invisible shield that encompassed me. I gathered that a demon or two might have been responsible for my accidental deaths throughout the years. The time in Hawaii and the child with the metal baseball bat, like they were trying to get rid of me but couldn't. Sometimes there was another entity there, almost human but fuzzy and faded, like an eerily familiar extension of myself.

A paradox of feelings and emotions assaulted my senses. Isaac, Mara, my parents, my sister, and old friends. It all swam in front of me until I felt an audible *pop* and a *crack*. I gasped for air as I slammed back into my physical body. I was back in the Canadian office, sprawled out on the couch, shaking, and covered in sweat.

Everything glowed bright white as the color oozed back in.

Then I *felt* it.

My sight wrapped around my brain and my vision, like it had been waiting for its invitation to come out and play. It seared along my skull until it settled into a dull ache.

Stars danced in front of me and I heard my name being called from somewhere far away. I felt someone's hands in my own, gripping my fingertips. My whole body tingled viciously, then the sensation faded and my eyes adjusted.

"Linc, love. Lincoln, I need you to come back to me," Priya's face wobbled into view. She sat on the floor next to me holding my hands. Taeler and someone I didn't recognize stood behind her.

I shot up too fast and nausea rocked through me. God, I hate being nauseous, and I *really* hate throwing up.

"That was like a bad trip on shrooms," I said, laughing shakily.

"I think she's fine," she said, looking at me and examining my eyes as if she could make me better with her touch.

"What the hell happened?" I asked, looking first at Taeler, then the woman next to him. She wore scrubs and a lab coat, her glasses perched on

her light brown nose, and her mahogany hair was tucked behind her ears.

“Lincoln, I’m Dr. Parker. It seems like the magic Taeler used to activate your sight induced a hypnotic state where your body began to shut down and seize in order to cope. It seems like everything is okay now, but I’m going to suggest you take the next few days to rest and recuperate, as it looks like your sight has been activated. Your body might take some time to get used to all the new information and sensations. You may experience some headaches and eye soreness for the next few days or so. Regular Advil and cooling patches on your eyes will help,” she said smoothly. Her smile emitted a calm comfort. It was one of the first times I felt like a doctor was actually seeing me.

“Thank you, Dr. Parker.”

She nodded. “If you need me, here’s my number. Call anytime.” She handed me her card and I took it as she left the room.

“Thank you, Lora,” Taeler replied.

Priya still looked uncertain.

“Were you scared?” I whispered to Priya, our noses only a few inches apart. The look on her face when our eyes finally met seemed almost devastated, which was unexpected.

“I’m not ready to lose you yet, Lincoln,” she said seriously.

I didn’t know what to say to that so I just gave a little nod and a smile.

“I’m glad you’re okay. But I think we should take you home. We can figure out how to proceed tomorrow, okay?” She held out her hand and I took it, letting her pull me up. I stumbled a little and my head swam as she wrapped her strong arms around my shoulders to steady my feet.

“How many times is this now that you’ve literally had to physically help me up,” I grumbled, a little self-consciously, but as I sank into her side I didn’t feel her waver. I took a deep breath, feeling her clean scent wrap around me, and exhaled slowly.

My belly did a weird little flip-flop, and I looked up to see laughter dancing in Priya’s eyes. The flip-flop sank lower, turning into a warm pool in my stomach.

*Uhh...*

“I don’t mind. I’ll hold you up anytime, love.” She winked at me and I bit my lower lip. Things were getting flirty between us. That couldn’t be right. Surely she was just teasing me like friends do.

“It’ll take time, Lincoln. We’ll schedule another meeting after you’ve had some time to recover,” Taeler said, snapping my attention away from Priya and the strange fluttering in my belly.

“Thank you. I feel like a veil has been lifted. And I don’t want to be in the dark anymore,” I said genuinely as a door appeared behind him. He placed his hands on it, murmuring in the language I didn’t understand, and I saw glowing light blue letters. The door said “GK Directory Hall” on it.

I squealed, scaring Priya slightly so her arm tightened around me.

“I can see it!” I gasped.

“She’s going to be fine, Taeler. Thanks for having us,” Priya said, chuckling and guiding us through the now-open door. “I hope you won’t scream like that when you see your first ghost,” she teased again as we wandered through the hall.

I could read all the doors now. Each one was labeled with locations from all over the world. A floating directory seemed to follow us, hanging in the air as a guide back to the bar.

“I think I’m allowed some squeals and screams, okay?” I said playfully, shoving away from her. She giggled, grabbing on to my forearms and pulling me close so she was bending over me with her minty breath in my face, her eyes glowing.

I swallowed and looked at her lips like I had the other night.

Damn it. Why do I keep doing that?

Her grip on my arm were firm as she pulled me closer.

“I’ll do my best to help you control that, love.” Her words almost sounded like a purr. I could only blink in response as she laughed again and turned toward the door. I exhaled, not realizing I’d been holding my breath.

The low pooling in my belly returned, expanding straight towards my thighs, and I shook off the thought. I followed Priya up the stairs, wondering what exactly I was supposed to do about that.

**M**y second day on the job was spent telling Emir all about my vision of my creepy protector.

“It sounds like your sight has been bound by magic, so you were unable to use it until now, which is a bit odd because, usually, it would help a deathwalker or a GK. I’m not sure why this mysterious figure would bind it. But now I can tell that you’re a deathwalker. You have the touch of the afterworld now. It’s not surprising that afterworld beings have found you before now. However, the buffer is an enigma,” Emir said thoughtfully.

We were in the fancy office again, the fire roaring nearby, which is what I was attributing the constant heat low in my belly to, even though it only seemed to pop up whenever Priya was around.

“Does that mean I smell, or something? Like, what’s the *touch of the afterworld*?” I scrunched up my face. Priya laughed, and Emir smiled broadly.

“No, it means your energy is different now.”

“You smell lovely, Linc. Don’t worry.” Priya winked from where she sat, her long legs stretched out on the coffee table. She was doing a lot of winking lately.

“I will ask some of our elders and oracles if there were any sort of whispers of a reason someone would have their sight concealed. I’ve never heard of it before, but nothing is really normal these days anyway. Now that you have it, you can start training. After you take a week to rest, of course,” Emir said, nursing a cup of tea.

I opened my mouth to protest that I was fine, then a stabbing pain shot through my temple. I closed my eyes and rubbed at it with my fingers. A week seemed like forever, but I'd rather not have my eyeballs fall out of my head.

"The headaches will subside, but there's no reason to push yourself. Your body is adjusting and so is your mind. You've learned a lot in the last month," Priya said smoothly.

So much had happened: breaking off my engagement, meeting Priya, dying, finding out that I'm a deathwalker, and getting my new *job*. But, genuinely, I was fine.

For the most part, at least.

Did I sometimes cry at night over the loss of a partner? Yes. Was it because I missed Isaac? No. But did I miss having someone like him in my life? Absolutely.

"You are on bed rest for the rest of the week. I will allow you some reading if you'd like, as long as you don't have any more eye soreness, but let's hold off on any additional physical training. We can start that next week. Priya will answer any questions you have in the meantime," Emir said, standing and looking at the watch on his left arm. "I've got to head off to a meeting, but you're more than welcome to hang out here for a while. I'll email you some materials. We'll continue to unravel this mystery and keep you protected, Lincoln. We're so glad to have you," he said as he strutted out of the office.

"Do you not have better things to do than babysit me?" I asked playfully, standing and stretching out my legs.

"I do. But this is part of my job too. I'm happy to help you, love," she said, teeth flashing.

My heart warmed a little with that damn word.

More like *something else* warmed *a lot* when she said it.

I should figure that out. But it's probably just the fire in here. It is very...hot.

And Priya is sensational. Like a stunning intelligent warrior. I just admire her and her overall prowess, like a cute little girl crush that other people have on celebrities.

I'm glad to have her as a friend and mentor. No need to take anything further than that. I just broke off an engagement, and I have no business exploring a relationship with her that's anything besides friendship.



Additionally, I've literally never been in a relationship with anyone except Isaac. I've barely ever thought of anyone except Isaac, and that wound's still fresh so it's best to shut down whatever's happening inside me.

Plus, I have no idea if I like women, or if she likes women.

Aren't you supposed to have your sexuality figured out by the age of twenty-five? Am I just curious? Intoxicated by the amazement that is Priya? Just a horny gal who had sex regularly for a while, then suddenly wasn't getting any? I mean, I'd barely touched my vibrator since the breakup. Maybe I should pull it out and release some of this tension.

I shook my head and told myself to breathe, that there are a lot of other things going on right now and this could wait. Right?

I should probably just mentally table this.

"Linc?" She eyed me with her golden eyes.

I whipped my head towards her and panicked for a moment, because what if she could actually hear my thoughts.

"Ahem, yeah let's go," I said, grabbing my coat and following her out. "Fuck. Get it together, Linc," I mumbled to myself.

*I can do all of this.*

*I'm fine.*

*Really.*

At least that's what I kept telling myself.



WE MADE our way back to my apartment after we took a detour to Priya's to grab some books. She agreed to get some takeout and walk me through the gatekeepers' manuals. Mara was out for the night so we had the place to ourselves.

"How do you feel about sushi?" I asked, sitting on the couch and wrapping myself in a blanket. Priya had taken the floor in front of the coffee table, books fanned around her.

"Love it," she said smiling at me. Her long hair was tumbling on either side of her face. She was casual again today in a white cropped hoodie and black leggings. Her chains wrapped around her belly and poked out every so often. I was trying really hard not to be distracted by them or the fact that they're secretly magic weapons.

I ordered delivery and sat next to her on the floor.

“So what, exactly, am I looking at here?” I eyed the pile of various-sized handbooks she brought. Some looked tattered and worn, like they were straight out of fairytale, while others looked brand new. I truly had no idea where to begin.

Priya had brought sticky notes, and started putting them on the covers.

*History of GK, Afterworld 101, Deathwalker Code, Magic and Weapons...*

“Okay, so I put little notes on them to tell you what they’re about. You can really start wherever you want, but I’m going to suggest this one.” She handed over one of the large, older-looking ones. The spine was falling apart and it looked like it had seen some better days. “This is about the history of the mortal realm and the afterworld.”

I took the heavy book and flipped it around in my hands.

“So basically like the Bible, but this is legit,” I said, laughing a little to myself. I’m not exactly religious. I do believe that something has to happen after you die. But I never really got on board with the heaven and hell concept. “You could probably destroy religions, countries, and governments with this.”

I cracked it open and ran my fingers over the worn pages. I shivered a little thinking about how powerful this text is. It felt important and significant in my hands. I looked up. Priya was staring at me intensely, tilting her head to the side, and a muscle in her jaw twitched slightly.

“What?” I asked blankly.

“No one has ever really put it that way before, but yeah. The truth behind those pages could create a lot of chaos, even though most people wouldn’t believe it to be true. But I suppose that’s the power of free will. You get to choose how to live your life,” she said, pulling her knees to her chest.

“So I was born in India. We moved to London before my parents died, and I remember most of my friends in India practiced Hinduism. Then, when my brother and I went to live with my aunt and uncle, a lot of people practiced some form of Christianity. We were taught from a young age about our heritage as gatekeepers and it was hard. As a child, it’s hard to comprehend not fitting in. We couldn’t exactly explain the truth because the truth isn’t religion. It just *is*. But people’s perception is their own truth.

“I often wonder whether we could make the world a better place if we told everyone what lies in that text, but I have to remind myself that it doesn’t mean people would believe it. Religion is, so often, used as a weapon against marginalized people, myself included. A lesbian brown Indian girl in the United States is an easy target for bigotry. I have seen it and felt it deeply before. It’s disgusting that religion is used as a weapon to force agendas, instead of a belief system to help connect and uplift others.” Her eyes turned watery and she shook her head.

“I think having something to believe in is wonderful. Having purpose, or something bigger than yourself, is essential for all human life to feel grounded. But religion really isn’t that anymore. It’s weaponized, just like so many other things. There is so much racism, homophobia, misogyny, and a whole lot of other terrible things that the gatekeeper community often ignores as a way to stay impartial. But it feels like a cop-out. Our community is inclusive and diverse, yes, but these things affect everyone, even us. And we pretend it doesn’t because we live by slightly different rules. It feels very complicated.” She drew her knees in even closer and hugged herself, rocking slightly.

“I know it isn’t our job to save humanity from itself. Our job is to help them move to the next step, to the afterlife. It’s been difficult, at times, to remind myself of this. But where is the balance in staying impartial and keeping people safe? I know that I help the world by guiding people to peace after their death. But I wonder if we could prevent some of the lost and trapped ones from becoming something heinous in the first place if we were more open about what life and death are. If we fixed the problem, instead of just treating the symptoms, you know?”

Tears slipped down her cheeks, and I wasn’t sure what to say to make it better.

I agreed with everything that she said and my heart hurt for what she’s had to endure because of the way of the world. I don’t know exactly what she’s faced. But I have a pretty good idea. The simple existence of my bigger body was a problem a lot of people wanted to “solve,” and dehumanized as well.

Gently, I set the book down and scooted over towards her, wrapping my arm around her. She rested her head on my shoulder and I just held on.

“The world is a nasty, unfair place. I’m sorry it hasn’t been kind to you. And I’m even more sorry that so much of this weighs on your

shoulders. But know there is nothing wrong with who you are. The world is wrong, not you. And you shouldn't have to carry all of this on your own." I pulled away and put my hands on either side of her face, our breath mingling together.

"You are the most spectacular lesbian brown Indian girl I've ever met. And each of those pieces of your identity are beautiful and special and deserve to be treated with kindness and respect, just like all the other pieces that make up who you are, Priya," I said, pinning her with my eyes.

"I know the world hasn't always been kind to you either, Lincoln. I want you to know I see you, on the outside and the inside. You are one of the most brilliant, beautiful thing I have ever seen," she whispered.

My heart nearly exploded out of my chest. She *saw me*.

Tears started to slip from my eyes as her gaze grew more intense.

She brushed her fingertips against the wetness on my cheeks, and I stared at her lips.

Damn it. They were painted red again and all I wanted to do was touch them with my own. What was wrong with me?

I should have ignored the heat pooling in my belly. I'd been doing a pretty good job of doing that thus far. I really had no business getting involved with someone else right now. Plus, I was just now figuring out who I am. And Priya was crying because the world's a fucked up place for anyone who isn't a heterosexual white male who fits into regular societal beauty standards.

Before I could tell myself this wasn't a good idea, Priya leaned forward and brushed her lips against mine, barely making contact. I closed my eyes for a moment, opening them again to see her chest heaving and something dark simmering in her pupils. Her sorrow and anguish were there, but so was something else.

The kiss tingled on my lips and I wanted to know what more would feel like. I wanted to know what *Priya* would feel like.

My hands caressed her jaw, and I stopped thinking altogether and eliminated the space between our mouths. I pressed my lips to hers and something inside of me broke open. The heat in my belly raced through my body and I groaned as Priya's tongue started to gently explore my mouth. She nibbled at my bottom lip.

I wrapped my hands around her neck and felt her fingers wrap about my waist. Suddenly she was on top of me, her body pressed into mine as

we tumbled to the floor. Her beautiful breasts, hips, and legs were all tangled in mine, and her hands were everywhere as she tore her lips away and started moving along my jaw and down my neck.

Wet heat formed between my thighs and all I could think of was: *I need more.*

*More. More. More.*

I gasped as her hands, smooth and agile, fanned over the softness of my belly and traveled up my sweater until her touch was on my breasts, kneading slightly as her mouth continued to taste the skin toward my ear, then down my neck. All I wanted was more friction from her in between my thighs.

“Priya.” I moaned her name as her hips moved against me slowly.

I felt like everything was on fire and I wanted all our clothes off. But the most I could do was hold on as she worked her mouth and her hands over the dips and valleys of my body. Pleasure built from my center, aching to be released. Her mouth left tingles all over my skin, and I wanted more. *I needed more.*

“Delivery!” Someone knocked on the door, and Priya whipped her head up. I stared at her, fully convinced she was the most spectacular thing I had ever seen before. What the fuck was this feeling in my body?

She smiled down at me wickedly and smashed her lips to mine, thrusting her tongue in boldly and pulling at my lower lip as she backed away from me.

“I’ll get it,” she said as she climbed off of me. I just lay there in a daze, wondering what happened and how it could happen again with fewer clothes.

“Thank you,” she mumbled as the delivery guy looked over to where I was sprawled on the floor with swollen lips, my sweater barely covering my breasts.

“Can I join?” he asked.

“Fucking hell. No! Shove off!” Priya slammed the door and I burst out laughing.

“I hate men,” I said, closing my eyes and throwing an arm over my head as I giggled deliriously. I would not let the creepy delivery guy kill this moment.

Priya brought the food over and sat down next to me as I sat up. I smiled goofily at her and she smirked back at me.

“I’ve never kissed a girl. I would very much like to do it again. Very soon. Maybe with less clothing? And maybe with kisses in other places?” I said, scooting closer to her, encasing her with my legs on either side of her hips.

Her smile widened then. “I didn’t want to push things because of your broken engagement, and I didn’t really know how you felt about women,” she said quietly. Her eyes still simmered with desire.

“I feel like my engagement was for someone else. Another Lincoln. It’s not to say I’m fully over the grief and pain, but I know that he will never be what I want. And I know that who I am now can’t be in a relationship like that again. I always identified as straight. I mean, I’ve been with the same man for almost a decade. And I’ve either been in that relationship or been recovering from it, but I know that I like you. And I don’t need a label on my sexuality to know that I want you. I guess I am bisexual? Queer? I don’t know if that exactly feels right, but I do know this...” I gestured between us, “this feels right.” Her hands tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, and she pressed her lips to my forehead.

“It feels right for me, too.” She kissed the top of my nose and my mouth slowly, like she was memorizing every part of me. That wet heat flooded back to my inner thighs and ached to be released by her fingers.

“Now, let’s eat!” she said before smacking one final loud kiss on my mouth. I sat there dumbfounded, my lips parted.

“But what if I’m hungry for something else,” I pouted deliberately, looking at every part of her body and licking my lips dramatically.

“Come on, there will be plenty of time for that, love.” She laughed and opened our takeout boxes.

I grinned at her, wondering how I had gotten so lucky to find someone like her.

The next few days, I was enveloped in the books Priya gave me.

We didn't get to spend a ton of time together because she was busy with gatekeeper things. My brain was practically overflowing with all this new information, and I was still recovering from receiving my sight.

It was weird how easily we seemed to fit together in this new world I was now a part of. We hadn't shared any more heat-laden kisses. She would usually arrive and leave with a kiss on my cheek or at the corner of my mouth, like she was worried her lips might chase me away.

When it was, in fact, the exact opposite.

With every chaste kiss and casual touch I wanted to see and feel more of her, more of us.

I hadn't stopped thinking about the other night and what it meant. I'd only ever really been with Isaac. I mean, there were a few times when we weren't dating that I hooked up with a random guy, but nothing serious, and never with a woman. And it was always disappointing, like they had no knowledge of how to work with a vagina or a clitoris. Honestly, it was laughable how terrible it was.

Even though I knew I was still healing and adapting to my life without Isaac, I also knew I couldn't control the timing of things. I wanted to explore this. I needed to understand this part of who I am, my sexuality. Was it genuinely a new thing, or had it always been something I just never took time to explore, and simply ignored?

When I really thought about it, I realized that sometimes I have dreams about myself with women. Then there was the time when I was fourteen, horny as shit, and thinking about having sex with every living being. I'd just assumed it was normal to think about banging men and women at that age because my hormones were out of control. Then I met Isaac, and I never really gave myself room to explore my sexuality. Even though sometimes, when I masturbated I wasn't thinking about a man between my legs, but rather a woman.

Holy shit.

The signs were all there and I'd brushed them aside. Cisgender heteronormativity really got me good for the first two decades of my life. Honestly, I'm not sure why I ever thought I was one-hundred-percent straight to begin with, now that I'd tallied it all up.

I was excited, and terrified, to navigate these feelings with Priya. I smiled thinking about the way her lips felt against mine, and the heat in my belly started to trickle even further down my body. Everything about her called to me. I wanted to take all the time in the world to explore our connection, without the distraction of everything else going on.

I sighed and realized that I should really be focused on other things. My life had completely flipped upside down, and I needed to zero in on the task at hand.

I was trying to pace myself with everything, but I felt like I had been starved for years. As if my body and my head had been holding space for *all of this* for decades, and I was trying to put all the pieces together in a speedrun. And in the holes, I tried to puzzle in hours of reading and research, even though I was technically on bed rest. But the headaches were just a whisper now, and I was eager to use my newfound power. I'd been behind a veil for so long, I was yearning to see and experience everything with my own eyes, which is how I found out that the GK not only has a whole library of books hidden away, easily accessed through the directory hall. They also have an intranet of sorts, where information is readily available and shared. Emir had happily indulged my questions and pointed me to their internal mainframe since I was plowing through the books he'd already given me.

I felt like a kid in a candy store ready to taste every new flavor, which is how I ended up, that Saturday evening, Googling random things on their database, including Priya and her job at GK. Only to realize that I didn't



even know her last name. I tried a different approach. I looked up “head of USA branch” in the search bar, and Emir’s name popped up: Emir Banks-Haldar.

*Hmmm okay.* I started to dig further, which is how I found their parents.

Priya had mentioned that she grew up with her aunt and uncle after her parents died, but she never said how they died, and I never asked. It was something I wanted her to share with me when it felt right, not because I was being a nosy bitch and inquiring about it. Although I was being an exceptionally nosy bitch now.

Henry Banks and Sneha Haldar.

Henry Banks had been a particularly gifted gatekeeper, while Sneha was a rare gatekeeper with oracle abilities. I didn’t exactly know what either of those things meant. I scanned the information. Twenty-five years ago, a demon brutally attacked their home. The report was detached and factual.

Blood on the walls.

Both hearts missing.

Claw marks on the bodies.

Thankfully, their children were untouched, hidden in an underground bunker in their home.

Are all GK deaths recorded like this, or only the demon attacks? I thought demon attacks that lead to deaths were rare. At least, that was the impression Priya gave me. I clicked on the link in the case file, and my stomach rolled with unease. It was all laid out like an official police report. The pictures were clinical, labeled, and numbered, showing the complete destruction of the bodies.

Blood-soaked clothes, stained walls, open wounds, and mangled flesh all recorded and on full display. It was like a punch to the gut knowing these people who Priya loved and cherished were taken away from her so viciously.

I wondered how painful it all must’ve been, for her and Emir to have gone through this. But I couldn’t look away. I couldn’t stop. I needed to know why this had even occurred in the first place.

I kept scanning until they talked about the demon. It said Priya had seen him and his name was “Inanis,” which sounded like Latin, so I quickly Googled it and it came back as *void* or *emptiness*. That is

absolutely terrifying. I swallowed the lump that had begun to form in my throat and squeezed my eyes shut to fight back angry tears.

Suddenly, something didn't make sense. How did Priya see him if she was tucked away safely? Maybe it was a typo or something? I shook my head and continued on.

There was a digital drawing of a man with sharp angles, dark hair, black eyes and dark wings. He looked like a evil angel, or something out of a comic book. The epitome of the villain in an adventure novel. But there was darkness swirling around him, and a grin that didn't look feral, exactly, but rather full of knowledge. I shuddered.

Is this how Priya described the demon she saw?

His name was a hyperlink so I clicked on it, and it listed out information and confrontations that had happened with this particular demon. The first date was five years after the first attack in England, when he appeared to *Priya Banks-Haldar*.

This time the information was short and nondescript. It said she had just spotted him, no contact. Something about that felt very odd. There were three other links, each spanning five years apart. The next link also claimed that Priya had seen him, but there was no contact. But in the last two, she engaged. In the final one, there were other names listed as well.

The first time, the report said she chased him and they exchanged words, but it didn't say much else about what the demon was. Something about that also felt super weird. Why wouldn't there be more information, considering the detailed reports on her parents' deaths?

The last report had just happened six months ago. Priya said, in Taeler's office, she hadn't seen a demon in a long time. Why would she lie about that?

I clicked on the report, and realization hit.

She had almost died from this encounter.

The other names, they were all dead. Five deaths from this *one* encounter.

This one was detailed and it sliced through me, cutting even deeper than the news of her parents. Priya had been on a mission with her team. They were attacked, and Priya was the only one who was left alive.

I fought the wave of nausea that swirled in my stomach. How could she have faced so much death in her life already?

The others didn't have pictures. It said that the scene and the people were too heinous and unrecognizable to show on the site, that out of respect for their families and their loved ones, the images were only accessible by certain personnel. But what exactly does that mean? Priya's parents' deaths had been gruesome and disturbing. Why is this information being safeguarded? What exactly had been done to those people, and what had Priya gone through that evening?

Priya's entire team...dead.

It did show evidence of Priya, and my insides rolled again. I held my hand to my mouth to keep from vomiting.

She had claw marks across her torso, from her hip to her shoulder, and it mentioned fractured bones, blood loss, and several other things. A picture of the scene showed her own chains wrapped around her like they were trying to hold her together, as too much blood seeped from her wounds.

Was it only her own blood, or someone from her team's as well? One of her arms was stretched out like she was reaching for someone, her expression was laced with pain. If I didn't know that Priya was alive and well now, I would have guessed this was a picture of her death. She had too many injuries, too much blood loss. How had she recovered?

My heart slammed into my belly and I held my breath as I read that Emir had found her, and she suffered amnesia from the experience. She couldn't recall all the events of the night and had been temporarily suspended from the special ops team for six months. She had no memory of her team being ambushed and murdered.

I closed my eyes. I couldn't imagine not remembering something like that.

I checked the report date: six months from last week.

She would have been reinstated to the special demon slayer squad by now. I didn't know what to do with this information. How the hell do you recover from that? Is she seriously still going to go out demon hunting after what happened? My brain couldn't even compute the trauma she had gone through.

Guilt washed over my body as I digested everything I'd learned. I shouldn't have been snooping around, even if it was readily available information. I should've waited for her to tell me. But I couldn't hold on to this secret. I needed to talk to her. I needed to look into her eyes and see

that she is alive and well. The images of her skin in ribbons and her chains holding the pieces of her belly together were cemented into my brain.

I had to tell her that I don't need to keep her at arm's length in regards to us. I want her. I want to feel her hands around me and kiss the scars and pain away, which doesn't make much sense since we've only known each other for, like, a month or so, and we just had our first kiss a week ago. But damn, did it make my heart rip in two to see all this.

Her whole goddamn squad had been torn apart by this bastard. I couldn't imagine the pain and heartache she was most likely still going through. How is she doing only six months after the most traumatic thing I'd ever seen or read about in my entire life?

Not to mention, if she was going up against this particular demon again, what would happen? It seemed like Priya was more than capable of handling herself. I could only imagine that her team had been just as strong as she was. What monstrous powers do demons have to be able to do what was described in those reports?

I started to wonder how this could've happened in the first place. Isn't the queen of the afterworld supposed to keep demons locked away permanently in her prison? Why hasn't she stepped in to help in the last ten years? It's another mystery to be solved. And how many GKs would have to die for this cause in the meantime?

I needed to see Priya.

I was the only deathwalker that they knew of. I could go to the afterlife. Talk to the queen. Understand what was going on. Then help. So Priya wouldn't be haunted by this beast for the rest of her life. I didn't want this demon to take anything else from anyone ever again.

How many others have demons who are just waiting for the perfect moment to attack them in the dark? What had occurred in the last ten years to make things escalate to such violence?

I needed to be a part of this solution.

I grabbed my coat and headed out the door, shoving a hat on my head and shooting off a text to Mara about not waiting up for me.

I stepped out into the cold and headed to the bar.



I DIDN'T GET that far because, as I hopped off the train and headed toward Priya, I caught movement in the corner of my eye. I should've kept going, but what I saw didn't feel normal.

Since learning everything I had recently, I greedily wanted to see a ghost or soul, so I turned right into a dark alleyway and followed the figure to the end, popping out on the other side and looking down the cold, dark streets. People littered the sidewalk and I almost didn't see the blur of white energy before it disappeared behind a stone building. My heart raced and I flexed my fingers in excitement. Finally!

I hurried after it and continued to play this game of cat and mouse until I realized that I was very far away from the bar. At this point, I should've called an Uber to take me there because it was freezing and I was nearly breathless chasing something that I was definitely not catching.

I reached for my phone and clicked on the Uber app, only to realize both my app and my maps showed nothing.

*Um...*

I looked around the empty streets and swallowed. Being a woman in an isolated part of the city was not exactly the safest move.

*Fuck.*

How did I actually have no idea where I was? This made absolutely no sense. The excited energy I had earlier sizzled away as quickly as it had come on.

"Lost, darling?" a dark, inhuman voice asked from behind me. It was like a cold turned sharper. Instead of a constant pressing against my body, it was like a knife slicing straight to my bones.

Slowly, I turned around.

He looked human. He was tall, broad, and tanned, with blonde hair sweeping across his brow. He was impeccably dressed but, despite his sunny, all-American-boy look, he had an edge. His eyes were navy blue, almost black, and there was a darkness that seemed to seep from him. I felt like I should be afraid. But he felt...familiar, like the hard iciness that had slapped against my back had been transformed into something warm and soothing.

There were too many sensations happening in the moment and I could barely keep my head straight. I didn't understand if he was a friend or foe. I narrowed my eyes at him, and he offered a small, amused smile as if we were sharing a secret.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, trying to sound confident but feeling uneasy.

“Walk with me, Lincoln.” He held out the crook of his elbow, his eyebrow arching as his voice moved around me like silk.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked, not moving a muscle. I glanced at my phone, trying to decide if I could call for help. But there was no service.

He laughed, the sound loud and rumbling. “I suppose you don’t. You also don’t have enough time to call for any friends, so why don’t you just take my word that I will do you no harm.”

I didn’t trust a damn word he said but I didn’t have any other options, so I slipped my gloved hand through his offered arm and fell into step next to him.

I should’ve been more afraid, but fear wasn’t the most pressing feeling. It was this sense of knowing him and this unease, like a warning in my gut that danger wasn’t imminent, but coming on the horizon.

We walked the empty streets with crates on either side and metal warehouses surrounding us. Where had I been tricked into going?

We walked for several minutes before I could no longer bear the silence.

“How do you know my name?” I gazed up at him. “And what do you want with me? Because I can’t imagine it’s an icy stroll. And why do I feel like you’re familiar even if I know we’ve never met before? And where the hell are we? Are we still in Chicago? Why is my phone dead weight right now?” He looked at me and laughed again, which was starting to become an annoying sound.

Suddenly, we weren’t alone. There were souls, ghosts, wraiths, and demons in my perimeter, like a giant circle was cast around me and my new friend. I blinked, and it was gone, like an illusion that hadn’t been real in the first place. There one minute and gone the next. I stopped and swept my head back and forth.

“What’s going on?” I pulled my hand free and backed up.

“Think of me as your guardian angel.” He smirked.

“I don’t believe in angels.” I squinted at him and crossed my arms.

“You were only able to access your sight recently. I’ve been close to you for years. You could never see me, but you could feel me.” He casually picked an invisible piece of lint off of his dark coat. “I protected you from this.” He gestured to the perimeter around me, and it flickered to

reveal the afterworld leaking into the mortal realm. I involuntarily backed up closer to him, afraid of the monsters coming closer.

“When I accessed my sight, there was a buffer and a dark figure. Was that you?” I asked. I was confused because, if he’s my protector, shouldn’t I feel safe? Except I didn’t. I felt more on edge. Like he could stab me in the back at any moment.

“Yes, and those are all the things I’ve kept at bay. Of course, a few of them slipped through the realm walls from time to time, which I very much regret.” He held out his elbow again as we continued to walk, sweeping his gaze around me and flickering his eyes towards the sky.

I didn’t take it this time and stuffed my hands inside my pockets instead. What kind of guardian angel lets you almost die from what they’re supposed to be protecting you from? If this man was an angel, he was a shitty one for sure.

“What do you want?” I asked, a bit more harshly this time.

“Is that really any way to talk to your protector?” He smiled wolfishly.

Something about this was wrong despite the familiarity of his presence. My skin tingled, as if warning me about a danger, but I couldn’t wrap my head around what was happening.

Too much had occurred in the last week. Too much was happening now, and I felt like I was drowning. My thoughts were slow and I was trying to seem confident, but my body felt heavy. My head, cloudy. This otherworldly being—a guardian angel, my ass—was absolutely not a good sign.

I needed to get away from him. My red-flag meter was telling me to run. I felt like I was slipping on something, like smoke between my fingertips. I couldn’t hold on to it and it was gone before I could really get a clear thought on it.

“I simply wanted to test this new boundary,” he said vaguely, gesturing between us. “You’ll know more soon enough, be careful of your little gatekeepers.” Suddenly, he stood behind me, his breath against my ear and his hand running down my arm. He snapped in my other ear, jarring me.

I blinked and I was in front of the bar. I looked around for my *guardian angel* but he was nowhere to be seen.

I swallowed and turned away from Priya.

I couldn’t go in, not right now. I needed to sort out my thoughts and I couldn’t do that with alcohol. So I headed home, wondering what, exactly,

I was supposed to do with what had just happened.



I texted Priya the next morning and asked if she wanted to come over. I had slept on the events of last night, and I needed to tell her what happened. Plus, Priya hadn't met Mara yet, even though I had spilled the details about our kiss and our budding relationship. Mara was so happy that she nearly squeezed the life out of me.

I spent most of the morning gushing over Priya and how amazing she is. Mara listened intently and smiled broadly.

Priya being a woman didn't even faze Mara. She said, and I quote: "I'll love whoever you love. Put a label on your sexuality or don't. All that matters is that you like it and you like who you're seeing." My heart melted just thinking about it.

With everything going on, it's nice to have her in my corner supporting me. She's the only one in my life right now who actually knows everything; a beautiful mix of the past and present colliding together. I'm so thankful to have a friend like her.

I scrolled on TikTok while Mara watched Queer Eye on the couch. There was an abrupt knock on the door.

"Are you ready?!" I squealed, looking at Mara.

She sat up straight and smirked. "Girl, yes. Open the fucking door!"

I jumped off the couch, checked out my hair in the mirror next to our front door, and took a deep breath. This wasn't that big of a deal, but it kinda was. It wasn't that we were, like, official or anything...it just felt like it meant something. This is the first time I was really recognizing my

own sexuality and stepping into this new identity without Isaac; like a new chapter in my book, and I was beyond ready for it.

“If you don’t open the door, Linc, I will,” Mara said from behind me on the couch, her eyes narrowing at me. I laughed and opened the door.

“Hi! I’ve missed you this week!” I squealed, opening the door expecting to see Priya’s bronze skin and flowing hair. Instead, Isaac stood in the hallway. My heart dropped to my stomach and I froze.

*Fuck.*

My body was not ready to see him. I felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on my head. I didn’t even know where to begin with him. What, exactly, was I supposed to say to him?

“Isaac?” I sputtered, confused. The smile on his face faltered.

Was he expecting some sort of warm welcome? I had been purposefully ignoring and blocking his attempts to contact me for the past month a half. Who does he think he is, showing up here and feeling entitled to *my* time in *my* home?

“You were expecting someone else?” he asked. Confusion, hurt, and anger flashed across his features.

I balled my hands into fists and dug my fingernails in. He had no right to be angry. He had no right to anything at all when it came to me.

“You aren’t answering my calls or texts.” He folded his arms across his broad chest. His dark hair was a little longer, and even though his skin was tanned it looked waxy, like he hadn’t been eating much or something.

My head swam, trying to piece together an appropriate reaction. The grief and anger that swirled around me ebbed and ached, but it was mourning. Not heartache. Mourning a whole life, a whole version of me that didn’t fit into my new reality. The anger tried to pull me. I wanted to scream and beat my fists against his dumb face but I felt rooted to my spot, unable to find my voice or anything else for that matter.

“Um...,” was all that came out. I wanted to yell at him and tell him I had realized that I deserve better. That my life is different now. That I am so far away from being in the same space as he is. It was almost comical.

Truthfully, I had pushed Isaac aside in my head to a special place that I hadn’t visited in a while, with everything else going on. It still soaked into my life, but it was like a small wound that continually oozed instead of a gaping slash to my heart. I had compartmentalized the breakup and the wedding to another part of my brain, where it couldn’t hurt me. I had

fortified my emotional walls. There was absolutely no place for him anywhere in my heart.

He searched my eyes and I'm sure he expected to see something else. Hurt? Anger? Embarrassment? But a new Lincoln looked out. I had risen from the dumpster fire that he set, like a phoenix from the ashes. Who I was before barely exists anymore. How do you explain that to someone who you spent years with but who never truly loved and accepted who you are?

"Can I come in?" he asked, taking a step forward. I opened my mouth to say I would really rather he not, when Priya came into view down the hall. Her eyes flickered from him to me and registered the panicked look on my face before they started simmering.

"Linc?" He took another step toward me, reaching for my arm. I backed away, not wanting any physical contact between us. It made me physically ill. Why, in God's name, did he decide to show up at my place?

Priya and I are so new that I don't want to drag her into this mess. But she was there to help me pick up the pieces before we were even friends, when she was just a bartender and I was just a heartbroken girl. And fuck it, I wanted her, not Isaac's entitled ass.

A new feeling ignited in my veins as Priya moved closer. She gave me new strength. New power.

So I passed Isaac's outstretched hand and grabbed for hers. Laying my claim to her and her to me. It felt good. It felt right.

"Pri! I'm so glad to see you," I said. She pressed a kiss to my forehead and I leaned in to her touch, closing my eyes and breathing in her scent. She continued to ground me with her presence, and I felt like I could face whatever Isaac had to say as long as she was here beside me.

Isaac's eyes lit up with anger as he looked at me and Priya. I could feel the tension sizzle and snap between them.

"Now's not a good time, Isaac," I said finally. "Or any time, really." There would never be a good time for Isaac to pop back in, ever.

Mara stood in the doorway. "You don't just show up unannounced, Isaac," she said, blocking the doorway with her body.

He looked between Mara and me.

"What's this?" He snarled and waved his hand to where I stood close to Priya, our hands intertwined. I leaned against her like she was the only thing holding me up.

“None of your business. You made the choice to not be in my life anymore. So go, I won’t ask you again.” I squared my shoulders and crossed my arms over my chest, daring him to continue.

“It looks like it took you no time to move on. Glad we meant nothing. And now, apparently, you're into women?” His voice was rising, and Priya looked ready to sucker punch him in the face. I would have let her, except all I wanted was for him to get out and never come knocking again.

“You wouldn’t understand a damn thing about me, considering you were never really listening to who I am and what I wanted in the first place. Instead, you lied to me and to yourself, then blamed me. Leave, *now*. This is none of your business. *I* am none of your business anymore,” I snapped back. The anger was building. I tried to swallow it down as all the hurt and heartache pulsed forward in a white-hot rage that made me want to kick and scream. I was so done with being collateral damage to his indecisiveness.

His nostrils flared and rage burned in his eyes, but it was Priya who spoke. “You took ten years of her life. You don’t need to take any more time.” She tilted her head as if challenging him to come closer. The air felt too tight, too hot. I wanted this conversation to end immediately.

“Fine, but I deserve better than this.” He practically spit it out and stomped away.

“Don’t be such an ass, Isaac!” Mara called after him, rolling her eyes. “I’ll uh...give you both a second. Nice to finally see you in the flesh, Priya!” she said, winking before turning back into the apartment and gently closing the door. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Are you okay?” Priya faced me, her red-painted lips set in a hard line as her eyes filled with concern.

I broke then. My emotions were all over the place, and her concern for me was my undoing. I wrapped my arms around her neck and smashed my lips against hers, hot and needy. She stilled for one second, then her hands were on my hips and my back was up against the wall. My whole body ached for her touch.

Her mouth moved against mine, hungry and desperate as I swept my tongue across her lips and she slipped hers in mine. I moaned and pressed my body deeper into hers, wanting more than this moment.

“I’m going to take that as a yes, love,” she said, pulling away slightly and resting her forehead against mine.

I laughed.

“Better now. I didn’t know he was going to be here. I can’t believe he had the audacity to show up. I don’t know what he thought the outcome would be, but it certainly wasn’t this.”

Priya didn’t say anything, she just nodded and squeezed my hands. Her lips found my forehead and mine found the tip of her nose. We wrapped our arms around each other and just stood there, embracing until she laughed and said, “We should probably go inside. I’d really like to officially meet Mara.”

She pulled away and I whined, “Fine, but I want you to myself later, okay?”

She chuckled and pulled me towards the door. So many things swirled in my head but I couldn’t bring myself to focus on anything except Priya and the way my toes curl thinking about her kisses.



ISAAC’S unexpected visit hadn’t put a damper on the evening as much as I worried it might have. Mara and Priya got along swimmingly and it was such a surreal moment to see between my best friend and my...sort-of-girlfriend? Friend that kissed me? I wasn’t fully clear on our label. I should probably figure that out. Nonetheless, it was nice to see them laugh and enjoy each other’s company.

Later, Priya and I were cuddling when I blurted out, “What, exactly, is this?” I felt Priya laugh as I was sprawled across her chest tracing my fingers along the lines of her tattoos.

“What do you want us to be?” she mumbled. I looked up into her eyes.

I should probably also bring up what I found out about her and the demon, and my surprise visitor, but I didn’t want to ruin our moment. I wanted to be with her and breathe her in and bask in this feeling. I wanted the outside world to take a fucking break, and just live in this little bubble with her.

“More than friends, I think?” I pushed myself up to look at her with her dark hair fanning across my pillows and her black sweater dress hugging her body.

“Okay,” she said, smiling and pulling herself up to be eye level with me. “Let’s start with ‘exclusive more-than-friends’?” she asked, whispering across my cheeks.

“Sure.” I laughed. “We can start there. I like it!” I said, smiling. It felt like a good place to start. Like a gentle step in the right direction of dating after having my world flipped upside down.

She leaned in and brushed her lips against mine. I pulled her into me and lightly started moving my lips across her jaw, her ears, and her throat. She smelled like something I wanted to devour. Fresh and crisp. I tentatively reached forward and ran my hands down her arms, then up to her breasts and gasped as a throaty moan escaped her lips.

“Priya, I’ve never done this,” I said, suddenly insecure. This was my first experience with someone of the same gender, and I had absolutely no idea what to do.

She smiled and cupped my face in her hands. “That’s okay. I’ll help you. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” She laid a sweet kiss on my mouth.

“I want to. I want to touch you and taste you,” I said quietly. “If that’s okay?” I added, chewing my bottom lip and looking at her with a little bit of fear and hopefulness.

“I would love nothing more. Don’t be afraid, Lincoln. You can’t do anything wrong.” She started to lift her dress up and over her head, displaying her brown skin. She had faint scars across her chest, belly, and breasts. I wanted to kiss each one, to take away the pain of what had happened, but it still didn’t feel like the time to bring up what I had read. Priya would tell me when she was ready. So instead of making it a thing, I slid out of my skinny jeans and my white cropped sweater.

“I would just like to say that I can, in fact, do something wrong. I don’t know if you’ve ever been with a man but they, wholeheartedly, do most of this wrong,” I said, gesturing to my vagina.

Priya laughed then, loud and throaty. “Yes well, even if that’s the case, considering you, yourself, have a vagina, I think you’re already more equipped to pleasure me—and yourself—than you think. You are much more familiar with this anatomy than a man will ever be,” she smirked.

“If you say so,” I beamed back.

I gazed at her black lace bra and thong, then down at my red set. Where Priya had long, lean lines, I had full, robust curves. We both just

stared for a few moments, soaking each other in. I smiled like an idiot as Priya's eyes simmered and she traced her finger along the lines of my bra strap.

"You're magnificent, Linc," she said huskily.

"So are you." I gently pressed her back down and sat myself on top of her hips.

I traced my fingers across her collarbone and slid off one strap then the other, laying kisses there. She traced her hands along my hips and kneaded my thighs. I let my lips create a path across the lines of her tattoos and scars.

"Is this okay?" I asked as her hands left hot, tingling sensations across my body.

"You're doing great, love." She looked up at me, smiling encouragingly.

"I want this all the way off," I said, tugging at her bra. She laughed and sat up with me straddling her. She acted like me sitting on her was the most comfortable and natural thing.

I reached behind her and snuggled my nose into her neck as I unsnapped her bra. Gently, I pulled it off to display her full, beautiful breasts. I cupped both of them in my hands and she shuddered against me. I felt like a teenager all over again, discovering someone's body and the fun that could be had as you found what the other person liked and didn't. She reached up and released my bra as well. We were both open and vulnerable to one another.

She leaned in and started to kiss along the swell of my breasts as I gently played with hers in my hands. She put her mouth around my hardened peaks and I groaned into her. She switched to the other breast and gently nipped her way along until her mouth began to suck and her tongue swirled against my nipple.

I gasped as heat and pleasure built in my core, her tongue absolutely undoing me. I could feel my body aching for a release.

"My turn," I said, pushing her playfully to the bed. She laughed as I trailed my lips along her breasts and looked up at her.

She moved her hands to cup my ass and pulled my hips to her in one swift motion as I closed my mouth against her nipple and began to suck and nibble. She groaned and ground her hips into me, and it sent butterflies wildly beating in my belly. I went to give her other breast the

same attention as Priya began to move her hand to my wet center. She slipped her fingers into my panties and gently began to circle my clit. I gasped as her finger made lazy circles that caused my legs to shake. I braced my hands on either side of her ribs as I shuddered into her touch.

“Do you like this, love?” she asked as I stared astonishingly at her. I could feel an orgasm start to build as she slipped one finger inside my wet heat, then another gently curling while her thumb continued to swirl over my center in a beautiful rhythm.

“Your finger like a fucking pro,” I said suddenly breathless.

She laughed and slipped her hand out of me. “Just wait, Lincoln,” she whispered, moving to sit up.

“Wait, I want to try something,” I said, feeling brave.

Priya lay back down as I wiggled off of her and sat myself between her legs, gently slipping off her thong and exposing the small patch of hair that lay at her center. I started to kiss along her muscular legs and watched her eyes as I sucked on a finger and ran it along the seam of her. She arched her hips up and I slid inside her, my eyes widening at the feel of her slickness. She felt amazing in my hand.

“Tell me how to move inside you,” I said, locking my eyes with hers.

“Another finger, love,” she said as she moved along my hand.

So I added another one and gently stroked her inside and marveled at her beauty and strength. I slowly slipped out of her and started to kiss her belly and move further down.

“Lincoln. You don’t have to if it’s too much right now,” Priya said, looking at me sweetly. She was right though. I knew my own anatomy well enough to know what would most likely feel good for someone else.

“I want to try,” I said, and brought my lips down until my breath hovered above her center. I pressed my mouth to her, kissed it slowly, and placed both of my hands underneath her beautiful backside. I started to softly lick and suck, reveling at how she tasted and smelled of sex and Priya.

I swirled my tongue around and tried to listen to her groans. It sent pleasure throughout my entire body to be tasting her like this. I had a sudden moment of feeling *right* in between her legs, and I wondered why I’d ever thought I was straight.

She gave me directions of pressure, how to move my mouth, and other things until she was gripping the sheets and quivering in her lower belly.



“Stay right there, love,” she said, breathing hard as I continued the same movements with my tongue. “Now put your fingers in.” She moved her hips against me, and I obeyed her command. I was in complete awe of how she moved and tasted.

I don’t know how long I stayed there, but I wanted to continue to make her writhe and move as I explored and savored the deepest parts of her. Priya shuddered and lifted her hips, groaning loudly, and I felt her tremor against my hands and my mouth as her orgasm ripped through her.

I started to move my mouth back up her body, and slid my hand away so I was straddling her once more. I felt powerful and beautiful making her come.

I kissed her, wanting her to taste herself on me.

“See, you did very well, love,” she said against my lips. I laughed. “Now my turn.” She smiled wickedly and pushed me over so she was now on top of me.

“Wait, you just looked so blissed out, you don’t have to...ahh...,” I whimpered as she slid her hand down my belly to where my clitoris was swollen and achy for her. My body was still tingly from making her squirm.

The touch sent heat straight to my toes, and I arched my back.

“Did you want me to stop?” she whispered in my ear.

“No, please continue.” My body felt like it wanted to combust under her spell, and I was so ready for her touch.

She laughed again and moved down my body, planting kisses across the softness of my breasts, belly, and hips, like she was memorizing my skin with her lips. Her kisses and nips lowered as her hand continued to move lazily against my clit. Fire burned in my veins and pooled straight to my navel. I wanted to erupt around her.

She moved her mouth to hover right above my center and made eye contact with me as she bent down and laid a chaste kiss there. My whole body nearly spasmed from the light touch.

“Tell me how to make you cum, Linc.” Her mouth hummed and moved against me, and I had no words. The woman ate me out like I was the most delicious dessert that she couldn’t get enough of, and the way her tongue moved...I could have written songs about it.

“Everything you’re doing is amazing,” I gasped, practically seeing stars as her mouth moved against me and her fingers gently stroked inside

me. My center turned to lava as I groaned and grabbed for my breasts, pulling at my nipples, aching for the release. I ground my hips against her mouth and chased the building pressure in my core until I was shoved off the edge. I cried out as my whole body shivered and pulsed with the orgasm cresting through me. She moved her lips, trailing her way back to my own and I hungrily tasted myself on her.

“I like the way we taste together,” I whispered as she settled on top of me and gently moved her hand to stroke me tenderly.

“Me too,” she said as she watched me.

“Oh my god. I think I might cum again,” I moaned, her lazy strokes building something else inside of me. “I’ve never orgasmed twice,” I whispered breathily.

“Oh Linc, my love. You’ll get at least two, if not more. Women are much more equipped to pleasure women.” She smiled wickedly.

She was right. I was nothing more than a puddle of sex and orgasms with the smell of Priya on my skin and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

I woke up the next morning to an empty bed, and I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. My body felt great from the all the sex; gooey inside and out. I smiled, thinking of how being with Priya felt so right, and sighed loudly.

What an exciting adventure we were on together. My mind started to wander to Isaac and the outburst yesterday. I knew that I didn't want any sort of relationship with him, but it still hurt to see him and experience his anger. I wish he would just move on without me. I didn't want him to be miserable, per se, but I didn't need to actively contribute to his happiness or his life anymore.

Why are breakups so messy?

I frowned, glancing around my room. Where do Priya go?

I grabbed my phone off my nightstand and saw a message from her.

**Priya: Emir needed me for something this morning and I didn't want to wake you since you're technically still supposed to be resting. :) Last night was wonderful, Lincoln. I hope we can do it again very soon. Text me when you wake up. <3**

I peeked over at the clock and my mouth dropped open. It was ten thirty. I couldn't remember the last time I slept so late. I guess my body did need some rest. I stretched lazily, mentally chastising myself for not bringing up my weird guardian angel visitor or any of the things I'd learned the other day. I felt like I had invaded Priya's privacy by looking into the death of her parents and her demon encounter on the intranet, even though it's public knowledge to all those who have access.

That didn't mean anything. She should have the freedom to bring it up on her own time. There's no way for me to justify it because I was being nosy and rude.

*Ugh.*

Obviously I need to work on bringing up hard conversations and not just diving straight into sex. Clear and open communication are necessary here, and I was doing a poor job of actually following through on that.

I whipped off my comforter and swung my bare legs around. I didn't normally sleep naked, but I hadn't seen the point of putting clothes on last night since Priya and I cuddled most of the evening. How lovely to be with someone who doesn't immediately fall asleep after sex or totally neglect any sort of aftercare.

I grabbed my robe hanging off the side of my full-length mirror when I saw a large snarling black beast in the reflection. I screamed and the robe fell out of my hand as I landed on my ass. I scrambled back from the mirror and looked behind me to see nothing.

I breathed heavily and looked around my room. My heart was racing as I tried to think of how in the hell I was supposed to survive a demon attack, naked and alone. I frantically scanned the space for a weapon, for the beast, for literally anything to help me.

But the room was empty. I swallowed and looked back to my mirror.

The thing was still there.

There was a goddamn demon stuck in my room.

Its skin was oily black and pebbled. It looked like a mix between a gargoyle, a giant dog, and a human. It had long claws and teeth the length of my forearm. It drooled, watching me with completely white eyes. My skin crawled and I felt way too vulnerable in my bedroom.

In the mirror, it looked like it consumed my entire bed with its grotesque and muscular body. It made me want to wash my sheets. Twice.

I looked at my bed again to double-check that I was alone, and slowly got up to put my robe on as its white eyes followed my movements. If I was going to die by a demon attack I certainly didn't want to be stark naked.

"How are you in the mirror?" I whispered. It tilted its head like it could understand what I was saying. I shuddered. *What a horrible-looking creature.*

The fear I felt was fading since it seemed like the creature wasn't interested in leaving the mirror, and anxiety started settling in. I studied the monster intently, then the image changed. It swirled like smoke and the demon dog was gone. The smoke turned black. A bloody hand pressed against the glass with smears of red, and I stepped back again fighting the urge to scream. My eyes widened as the hand started to move through the sticky dark red liquid.

*Regina.*

The letters dripped down the glass as it shuddered, then the whole thing filled with smoke and leaked back into the image of my room once again. Slowly, I moved and placed one fingertip on the mirror, afraid that it would suck me in, but it was simply a mirror once again.

I swallowed hard, not sure what to make of what just happened. I pressed my whole palm against the cool glass and exhaled loudly as I laid my forehead against it. I let the coolness of the mirror ground me as I took a few shuddering breaths. Apparently, I needed to be prepared and trained on how to deal with a demon, like, yesterday. Because I had a feeling that this wouldn't be the last time, and I didn't want to know what would've happened if it had been able to escape.

So what did it mean? Who was Regina? Whose hand was that, and whose blood?

"Should I be scared?" I whispered to no one, because I was. I was absolutely terrified of what all this might mean.

"Yes, you should be," a voice whispered behind me. The cool slap of power from my so-called guardian angel slammed into my back, and I face-planted into my mirror.

"Son of a bitch," I snarled, whirling around. Nothing was there.

I shivered as the power and the cold seemed to dissipate around me. The audacity of this man to show up in my room *after* a close-call demon attack was absolutely ludicrous. He had to be the worst guardian angel ever or a complete and total liar. I believed both options wholeheartedly.

"I thought you were supposed to help me, you annoying bastard," I said, baring my teeth.

"I am, princess." Again, the words sounded like he was right behind me.

I whirled again. "Show yourself!" I snarled, clutching my robe tighter against my skin. What is it with otherworldly beings showing up when I

only have a robe on?

A snap filled the room and there he was, sitting on my bed. Blonde hair and shining tanned skin, his dark, bottomless eyes stared into mine. He wore dark slacks and a white button up today; the top few buttons had been left undone to show off his smooth chest.

“You’re a bit overdressed,” I murmured, taking a step back and swallowing. Suddenly, the bravado I showed earlier seeped out of me.

“Would you prefer me like this?” He tilted his head, flashing his teeth. A small pop erupted and suddenly, he was completely naked except for a pair of black boxer briefs.

I blinked in response, trying not to look anywhere except his eyes. But it was hard. The bits I could see were very muscled and nicely cut. But I absolutely did not want him in my room like this, ever.

“No,” I said flatly, pursing my lips.

I alternated between wanting to punch him in his dumb face and wanting to run screaming because I just knew he was bad news, but I didn’t have any proof. Just a gut feeling.

He laughed darkly and his clothes popped back on. Thank Jesus Christ.

“This is so much more fun now that we can interact!” He purred, reclining belly down on my bed so he rested on his elbows. The iciness he gave off was fading into a warmth that threatened to pull me in. I imagined my feet were cemented to the floor, and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Why are you here?” I snapped. I wanted him and whatever demon thing that had made an appearance earlier to leave and never come back.

“Just checking up on you. Seems you had a bit of a visitor.” He gestured to the mirror.

“Do you have a name?” I asked, tilting my head and squinting at him like he was an annoying bug.

“You can call me Elijah.” He smiled brightly as if I would melt into a puddle in front of him. He seemed truly delighted with his own name.

“Alright Elijah, why are you protecting me? Who sent you, exactly? And why are you suddenly popping in and out of fucking nowhere?” I tried to make my voice drip with fake sugary sweetness as I batted my eyes and glared daggers at him.

“It’s my duty by the order of the queen herself. And I am always close by. Even when you’re doing unmentionable things in the night with your

little gatekeeper. Don't worry, I don't mind. I quite enjoyed it, actually." He winked.

"You're disgusting, you know that?" I spat. He smiled and winked, like it was some joke instead of a huge invasion of privacy.

"The queen sent you? What's going on in the afterlife? What just happened in that mirror? Why couldn't I know who you are sooner? Is the queen okay? Where are the rest of the deathwalkers?" The questions spilled from my mouth in rapid succession before I could stop them. Someone would give me answers, damn it, and eventually, I would rid myself of Elijah. But right now he was, unfortunately, my best bet at getting more information.

"Are you quite finished?" Elijah asked, not seeming the least bit interested in anything I was asking.

"Yes, answer one of my damn questions before I kick you out for being a goddamn voyeur!" I said, huffing loudly.

"Linc? Who are you talking to?" Mara called from behind my closed door.

"Shit," I mumbled. "Just myself," I called back.

Elijah widened his eyes and sat up straighter. I would not let Mara get tangled up in this Elijah mess. He's a disgusting, perverted, immortal angel-thing that screamed *bad news*. He obviously has no moral compass or integrity, and I will not let him near my best friend.

"I'll be out in a minute." I walked over to my door to press my ear against it and heard her mumble, "Okay, whatever," before her footsteps retreated down the hall. I would fill her in later. She deserved to know the truth and I wanted to tell her.

"Careful, Lincoln. You've started to invite trouble. You might want to keep your friend at arm's length," Elijah whispered, his chilled energy raked down my spine as I felt his body behind me.

"What the hell is up with this two-faced act? Are you threatening me now?" I asked, whirling around to see his tall frame standing mere inches from mine.

A devilish smile touched his lips.

"Merely letting you know you should be careful. You are proving to be quite the interesting creature. Goodbye, Lincoln." He leaned forward, and I backed up to the door as his lips brushed my cheek. I watched in awe as I

tried to shove him away, but my hands moved through smoke before he vanished completely.

I slid down my door and let out a strangled cry. Tears fell down my cheeks. I felt victimized and I had no idea how to get rid of him.

I didn't think, for one second, this guy was my guardian angel. And if he was, he was seriously one misogynistic prick. But he mentioned the queen and he did know something. He seemed to have unlimited access to me, which was extremely concerning. I buried my forehead in my hands and took slow steady breaths.

I needed to talk to Priya and Emir about this. They would know what to do. They could help protect me. Keep me safe. I shot off a text and asked if I could meet her and Emir in an hour, saying that it was urgent.

She replied and said to meet her at the bar.

I clutched my phone in my hand and tried to shake the image of the demon, the bloody hand, and Elijah out of my head.

My room no longer felt safe.

I stood up and wrenched open my door. I would get to the bottom of this, one way or another, because I had to.



I was fifteen minutes early to my meeting with Priya and Emir which, apparently, was the perfect time to meet my first ghost.

She was young, maybe twelve or thirteen, and she had on a hoodie, leggings, and sneakers. Her hair was piled into a bun on top of her head and she was chewing on her bottom lip. She glowed white and seemed to move through space a few inches off the ground. She was just walking down the street like a normal kid. I wondered what had happened to her.

“Hey,” I said, not really knowing what I was supposed to do. She jumped, as if surprised I could see her. Maybe ghosts didn’t know that anyone would help them? I still didn’t know much about the actual process of crossing over. I barely knew anything actually, despite doing an immense amount of reading and researching.

“Hi,” she said, twisting her fingers in her hands.

“Do you need some help?” I asked softly, walking towards her and smiling. I didn’t want to frighten her. I felt purposeful doing this, less like the scared, disempowered mess I’d been earlier.

“Yeah, I just...I’m not sure how to get back,” she whispered, gnawing on her bottom lip again.

I didn’t know what to do to help, but I figured I could wait with her until Priya and Emir got here so they could do it.

“I’m not sure either, but I have some friends who know how. They will be here soon. Do you want to wait with me?” I plopped down on the curve right in front of the bar.

“Okay.” She sat next to me, pulling her knees up to her chest. “Most people can’t see me, but I can see that you’re different. You have, like, a dark-colored energy around you.” She looked at me intently, squinting her eyes.

I would love to see what other people see. Is it, like, a black cloud? Sparkling dark glitter? Tendrils of smoke? I want to know what’s different, now that I have my sight.

“People say I’m a deathwalker. I’m still learning what that means,” I said, not sure what, exactly, I was supposed to talk about with a ghost, but this felt like a safe topic. Something reassuring to let her know I am, in fact, not a demon or fucked up guardian angel. Deathwalkers are nice and friendly, right?

I was sadly mistaken.

Her eyes went wide and she fell back, pushing herself up and backing away.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. Please don’t hurt me. I only want to rest. I was only trying to do what they told me!” She started sobbing, and I was frozen in place. What was she saying, exactly?

“I won’t hurt you. I don’t know what you mean. Please stay. My friends can help you, and you can explain what happened to you.” I opened my hands wide as if to show my own surrender.

She looked at me one last time and ran, in her ghostly form, down the street and around the corner. I was stuck to the curb, unsure and scared about what to do. I didn’t understand her reaction.

Had she been in the afterlife and got spit out? Taeler had said that could happen, but why would she react to the word *deathwalker* like that? What, exactly, was happening in the afterlife? I thought we were helpful and good.

I stared at my gloved hands and watched as my breath came out in small puffs. Tears started to fall then. I didn’t know what to do. Nothing made sense today. My head and my heart felt heavy. I had woken up so blissfully unaware of how horrible today would be.

Suddenly, I was sobbing. Tears swelled up, releasing a dam inside of me that I didn’t even know had been built, and I wept on the sidewalk. I shoved my face into my knees and wrapped my arms around my shins. I wanted to curl into a ball and take a do-over for today.

“Lincoln? What’s wrong, love?” Priya’s voice pulled my snotty face away from my knees and I looked up to see her crouching down in front of me so our eyes were level. Her features were wrinkled in concern.

“Everything has pretty much sucked since you left my bed this morning,” I sniffled.

She cracked a small smile and looked behind me. “Let’s get inside, okay? Then you can tell us all about it.” She placed a small kiss on my forehead and pulled me to my feet. I wiped the snot and tears with the back of my hand and saw Emir and Grey behind me.

“Don’t worry, honey. Whatever it is, we can figure it out together, okay?” Grey said, squeezing my hand and offering an empathetic smile.

Emir looked very concerned as he nodded. I just closed my eyes

“Okay, let’s go inside,” I said. I let her tug me in and sit me down at a table.

Emir and Grey sat on one side and I sat across from them while Priya went to get drinks.

Grey reached over and clutched my hand. “It’s okay to not be okay, Lincoln. We are here for you. You don’t have to do this alone, alright?” His eyes sparkled, and Emir nodded next to him.

“Okay, Linc.” Priya snuggled in next to me while she poured me a cup of coffee. “Why don’t you tell us what happened? Start at the beginning.”

“Okay,” I took a breath and went right in from the start. I explained the first time I met Elijah, the mirror, the bloody writing and handprint, my second Elijah visit, and finally, the ghost girl just now. No one said a word as I went through all the details. Tears fell from my cheeks but I ignored them. The need to release the emotional buildup was just too much.

At some point, my coffee had been abandoned and Priya had intertwined her fingers with my own. I clutched her hand tightly, and when I went to loosen my grip, she tightened hers.

“So now we’re here,” I said quietly, studying the table before closing my eyes briefly.

Emir had a grave look on his face and he nodded slightly.

“I’m sorry that this all happened in rapid succession, Lincoln. I’ve never heard of a “guardian angel” before. There are, however, angels of death. The original deathwalkers were said to be these angels. Powerful beings from the afterlife that served as the queen’s personal guard. The original deathwalkers were created from their blood. But the queen wanted

them to stay with her in the afterlife to protect the realm there. She announced that the angels would rule by her side, while the deathwalkers were sent to Earth to act as liaisons between the realms.” He rubbed his hand across his chin.

“We don’t have much information on them because there aren’t any records of them in the last few centuries. They were there at the beginning of time for the inception of the GK society, but not much is documented after that. There were accounts of deathwalkers seeing them or contacting them while in the afterworld, but I’ve never heard of them being on Earth or watching over someone.

“So I don’t know who this Elijah is, but he absolutely cannot be trusted, from what you’ve shared. We can equip you with protective charms and weapons, but I fear that it wouldn’t deter him from contacting you, seeing as his magic is unpredictable. I fear that his magic is ancient. Your concerns and feelings are valid in this regard. He is dangerous, indeed.”

I frowned at that. I’d had the same thought but I thought the gatekeepers might have another solution. Elijah had unlimited access to my life, and I had no idea what his angle was. How could I protect myself from someone who said they were supposed to be helping me if I have no proof otherwise?

“In regards to the mirror...we typically use mirrors as portals to the afterlife when we help souls, ghosts, and wraiths across. It’s the easiest and most abundant resource we have to link them. Deathwalkers describe the sensation as detaching from their physical body in order to slip into a mirror that acts as a portal to the afterworld.

Typically, when a demon has crossed into our world they will use a mirror as their mode of transportation as well. We should have spelled the mirrors in your home as soon as you got your sight. We will plan to do that immediately,” Emir said seriously, furrowing his brow.

“Lincoln, I think the thing you saw was, indeed, a demon, but I am not sure why it was just idly making an appearance in your mirror. Usually, it would want to pull through to the mortal realm. And as for the bloody handprint and smoke...I’ve never heard of another deathwalker experiencing anything like that before. *Regina* means *Queen* in Latin, so it could mean the queen is calling to you,” Emir continued.

“Doesn't that mean I should take a trip to the afterlife?” I asked seriously.

“Linc, that sounds very dangerous. After everything you just told us, it doesn't seem like the best idea to send you headfirst into the unknown. None of us would be able to come with you. You would be vulnerable and alone. Not to mention, we have no idea what's waiting on the other side. No one has been there in ten years, and the last people never came back,” Grey said darkly.

“You could get stuck there,” Priya whispered, her golden eyes watery.

“Okay, so maybe this exact moment in time isn't best for me to go. But eventually, I will need to, right? Isn't that the whole point of what I am? There's a reason you haven't had a deathwalker in ten years. My job is to be a liaison. And I want to. I....” My words caught in my throat briefly. “I did some snooping. I know it isn't my place and you don't have to say anything. I also know it was a nosy-bitch-thing to do and a violation of privacy.” I tumbled through my words while everyone stared at me strangely.

“I know what happened to your parents and what happened to you six months ago.” I sneaked a glance over to where Priya's mouth had set in a hard line. She took a quick inhale. Her hand went limp in my own, but I held on. “I don't want that to happen to anyone else or to happen to you again. It seems like a cycle. A pattern. And I don't want to lose you when we just got started,” I pleaded.

I peeked over at them, noting Grey's empathetic expression. Emir looked like he had drifted off somewhere a million miles away.

I swallowed. “So, prepare me to go to the afterlife. Let me do what I am supposed to do. Help me become strong and ready to speak with the queen and figure out what the hell is going on here, because I have a sinking feeling that whatever's happening isn't fucking good. That girl *ran* from me! Some sketchy shit's going down in the afterlife and on Earth and, for the first time in my life, this feels like what I'm supposed to be doing, so please let me help. Let me do what no one else can!” My voice raised, tears burning my eyes and scratching at my throat. There was a pause and the silence felt stifling. I held my breath. I didn't need their permission, but I wanted their help and this was the best way to get it.

“Okay,” Emir said, looking at Grey and Priya.

“Okay.” Priya didn't look at me.

“So when do I go to the afterworld?” I asked, setting my shoulders and narrowing my gaze.

Priya got up then and rubbed her hand across her brow. “When we think you’re ready. Can I talk to you privately, Lincoln?” She extended her hand and a flood of emotions threatened to knock me over. The last time someone said they wanted to talk to me, I got dumped, fully and painfully so.

I swallowed and nodded my head tightly and grabbed her hand, allowing her to pull me down the hallway towards the directory hall door. But instead of heading there, she opened a door to the right and we stepped into a small, cozy office with two oversized chairs, a desk, a bookshelf, and Priya’s personal things scattered throughout the space.

I shut the door behind us and tried to quell the feeling of wanting to throw up from rising from my stomach. Was Priya going to end things before they really started because I found out that information about her and her parents?

“What did you, um, want to talk about?” I asked, trying to keep tears out of my eyes. I wasn’t ready to let go yet. I felt more connected to her than I had to anyone else before.

A tear started to slip out before I could catch it and she was there in an instant, wiping it with her thumb. “I’m sorry, the last time someone said they needed to talk to me, my heart was ripped in two and I died that night. But on the bright side, I met a really amazing woman who makes me feel seen, heard, and safe in a way that I didn’t know existed.” I hiccuped and Priya’s gaze softened as she pulled me in for a hug. “You’re not going to do that, right?” I trembled. “I’m sorry I dug into your past. That wasn’t okay. I should’ve waited for you to tell me when you were ready instead of being selfish with my own curiosity. I won’t do it again. Please forgive me, Priya.” I sniffled into her chest and squeezed her hand.

“Lincoln, my love, I’m not mad about that. It wasn’t how I would have wanted you to find out, but I knew there was a chance you could stumble across it because it’s on the database. I just wanted to see how *you* were doing, and give you a second to breathe and hold space for whatever it is you’re feeling.”

“So, you’re not gonna break up with me as exclusive-more-than-friends?” I whispered, gripping the back of her shirt.

“No, love, I’m not.”

“I’m sorry. I’m feeling very emotionally vulnerable right now. I’m not really okay.” I clung tighter to her. We slipped to the floor and I practically crawled on top of her. The emotions I had stitched together before we entered the bar started to rip at the seams. I fell apart in her lap with her soothing words and gentle hands stroking my back.

“You don’t need to apologize. You’re allowed to cry, to feel, to not be okay. “

So I cried until there was nothing left and my breathing evened out.

I closed my eyes, gripping Priya until sleep pulled me in and I dreamt of nothing but darkness.

“I think we should start with you choosing a weapon,” Priya said from atop a black exercise block. Her chains are wrapped around her arms today, and draped across her shoulders. She looks ready to pop into combat at any moment. She hopped off the block and started guiding me around the expansive arena.

We were in a training room that was accessed through the directory hall. It was the largest open gym space I had ever been in. It was a full fitness center and had additional space and materials for weapons as well as combat training.

In one corner there seemed to be an obstacle course, and adjacent to that was a rock climbing wall. Another section contained an extensive weapons arsenal complete with shooting ranges for arrows, guns, javelins, swords, throwing stars, and a whole lot of other shit I didn’t even recognize. I tried not to think of how wild it is that they have a legit armory housed here.

A huge mat for combat training sat in the middle along with a whole tech system that allowed you to activate certain obstacles to practice demon-fighting scenarios. It was equal parts terrifying and exciting.

Everything seemed to go on for miles. Priya mentioned something about saunas, massage rooms, changing rooms, and some other things on the outskirts of the huge dome-shaped arena. Everything was sleek and modern, truly giving off secret spy vibes.

I still couldn’t believe that the GK Directory Hall is a magic hub for all of these secret spaces. It was wild to me that this whole other world



simply exists alongside the one I had known my whole life. I was ready to step into this reality and let go of my old one.

“See something you like?” Priya asked, pulling me back to the present moment. We had stopped in front of the rows of gleaming deadly weaponry. I had never picked up anything dangerous like this a day in my life, so I was at a complete loss.

Priya sat down cross-legged in front of me, idly fingering her chains. I had never seen her use them. They didn’t seem like anything other than standard jewelry that would change in shape, size, and color depending on her outfit. Sometimes they would wrap around her waist like a belt, her neck like a thick choker, or like a snake across her abdomen and breasts.

Honestly, it was super hot and a little bit kinky.

How the hell was I supposed to compete with a weapon like that?

“I’ve never held any sort of weapon, ever,” I said, eyeing the rows of shining daggers, guns, and swords. I cringed thinking of using one of them. Violence is not my strong suit here and, in reality, I really don’t want it to be. Priya’s chains, however, felt like a middle ground, like a weapon that’s also fun jewelry.

“How did you decide on your chains?” I asked, contemplating how I could choose something less inherently violent than a sword. I certainly wouldn’t be picking up anything with firepower.

“I wanted something I could have on me at all times that wouldn’t raise alarm. You saw what happened to my parents and me because of that demon. I never wanted to be caught off guard again. I needed something easy, accessible, and on me at all times. But it also couldn’t raise suspicion, so I had to get creative. My chains are connected to my gatekeeper gifts, so they’re an extension of me. I wanted to be ready at all times to protect those I love,” she said quietly.

I truly had no idea they were so important to her. But it made sense. It was her way of surviving the horrible events of her past. It was the armor she carried in order to move forward. Today she wore an all-black training suit that made her look like Catwoman. Her hair was pulled tight into a high ponytail, covering the small shaved part of her head.

She looked like a goddamn warrior and it made my heart swell. I hated that this demon has taken away aspects of her safety. She deserves to go out in the world without the need to have her weapons physically on her at all times. Maybe that was naïve of me to think, but I wish the world had

been kinder to her. I felt even more determined to help the GK Society get to the bottom of the mysteries that had plagued them for the last several years.

“So those who choose things like guns, swords, and spears have to be more creative about how to conceal it or make it more socially acceptable?” I asked, running my fingers across the plethora of weapons. This would probably be the first and the last time I would reach for these. There had to be something else I could connect with because it certainly wouldn’t be any of these. They felt wrong. Too heavy in my hand and too harsh to simply carry around.

“Yes, each gatekeeper bonds to a weapon through a magical spell. Deathwalkers, in theory, should be able to do the same. You’ll be the first deathwalker to give it a go, since we only started using weapons after all the deathwalkers disappeared.” She furrowed her brow.

“Wait, for real? So we don’t even know if I can be magically attached or bonded to anything? I may just have to use weapons like a regular human? I don’t even want any of these weapon,” I grumbled.

Priya laughed. “If you can’t be magically bonded, then we will train you with something you can easily conceal, like a dagger or a gun. It will just be trickier, as you can’t whip it out at random times or have it easily seen on your person. Most gatekeepers who choose larger weapons spell it so it can transform into something smaller like a bracelet, keychain, or something else.” She tilted her head, looking at me curiously.

“I am really not excited about a dagger or a gun, like, at all. I just can’t picture myself holding on to one and not feeling like a weird pro-gun white supremacist, you know?” I cringed.

Priya smiled. “We’ll have to get creative then. It’s okay if this isn’t in your comfort zone. We’ll find something that works for you, love.”

“So how much magic do you all really have? Because bonding weapons seems like a big deal. Can you fly? Cast spells? Make love potions?” I wiggled my brows, making dramatic gestures with my hands, trying to guide the conversation away from me having to actually make a choice about what weapon to use.

Priya laughed at that, a beautiful husky sound.

“Our magic extends to our abilities to help souls. We have heightened physical attributes and some have more of a flare for dramatic magic, but think of it as manipulating energy forces, as opposed to being able to cast

specific spells. We have spells for weaponry that we were cautioned by the elders to use only in dire times. But in the past ten years, every gatekeeper has been bonded to something. We have limited abilities to bond to anything else. It's a bit more nuanced than what our media often portrays." Smiling, she stretched out her legs.

"Hmmm...great, okay. Good to know," I said, looking anxiously at the array of weapons around me.

"What are some more non-traditional weapons, like your chains? Something that screams *America* less." I bit my lip and crossed my arms. The more I tried to picture myself with something sharp and pointy, the more I wanted to crawl out of my own skin.

"Well, I'm the only one I know with chains. Some who like close combat have brass knuckles, nails and hammers." I shuddered at all those options. It was like old-school mafia combat, and I was not getting on board with that either.

"Emir uses a whip," she said thoughtfully.

My mouth dropped open. "Kinky bastard," I said under my breath.

"Lincoln! That's my brother!" she said, jumping up and shoving me playfully.

"What? I'm just saying!" I laughed. "What does Grey use?"

"Nunchucks." She smirked again.

"Why do you all have to be so intense? Jesus! Okay well, um...god, I won't be able to pick a freaking weapon because—I wouldn't say I'm a pacifist, I'm just not this," I waved my arms at the selection before me. Sweet Grey uses nunchucks? I really am way over my head here.

"Has anyone ever used fabric?" I suddenly got an idea.

"Fabric?" Priya said curiously.

"Silk fabric, to be precise." I paced a bit in front of the weapons.

"I mean, I don't think so. Why?" She looked at me oddly.

"It can be spelled, right? To be whatever I need it to be? So, like, a shirt, pants, or something else? Are there limits to that?" I asked in rapid succession, trying to figure out exactly what I needed in order to make this work. I was determined to find something that could be mine.

"Yeah, it can pretty much be made to be whatever you need with a few locks around the spell," she commented thoughtfully.

"I have an interesting hobby that I haven't actually done in a few months, but I was an aerialist throughout college and awhile after. I used

silks.” I was mentally trying to figure out how this was going to work. Silks are strong and soft and not inherently violent, but they could be used in a way that could incapacitate people or demons quickly.

“Okay,” Priya said, stepping closer.

“I’m used to manipulating the fabric for myself. Surely I could figure out how to *weaponize* it, right? Similar to how you use your chains, I think,” I said, realizing that it was almost the exact same as how Priya used her chains, but in a gentle fabric as opposed to biting metal.

“Can you get some silks in here and I’ll try it?” I said, putting my hands on my hips.

“Sure. I like this a lot. It makes sense and you could manipulate them and fight in a similar way to my chains. Looks like you may have found your weapon, Linc,” she said, smiling wide.

*Man, I had good ideas.*

“Have you ever, you know, used your chains for other things?” I asked, stepping in closer, trailing my finger along the lines of silver on her arms and shoulders.

“Hmm, and what would that be, love?” Her gold eyes simmered.

“What I’m trying to say is, please tie me up in these because I think I might cum just thinking about it!” I flashed a smile, planting a kiss on Priya’s shocked face.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe you just said that!” she said giggling.

“Is that a no?” I asked devilishly.

“Absolutely not! I just haven’t had anyone ask before. I would be more than happy to try.” She winked.

“Then what are we waiting for?” I dragged her to me and wrapped my hands around her waist. “Take me now, please,” I said dramatically.

She cackled loudly before planting her lips on mine and drawing me against her. “Training first. Sex later,” she said against my mouth.

“Sex is a workout, you know? But okay, we can do it your way,” I pouted. She rolled her eyes and pulled me toward the training mat.

“Alright Lincoln, my love, let’s begin.”



*DUCK. Exhale. Kick. Punch.*

It was like my body had reconnected to a dance it knew long ago and was moving through the movements with muscle memory. Priya started to come at me harder and faster, and I felt deeply connected to my body on a cellular level. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before. Euphoric. Strong. Unbeatable.

“What the actual fuck?” I looked at my hands breathlessly, stopping for a split second and making eye contact too late, before Priya’s foot slammed into my abdomen and knocked the wind right out of me. I doubled over, choking with a grimace on my face. I clutched my belly and forced in big gulps of air.

“Oh my god, Lincoln, I am so sorry! I should have pulled back. Are you all right?” She hovered above me, scanning my body.

I started laughing loudly as the pain in my abdomen faded to a dull ache.

Priya looked at me like I had suddenly grown a tail.

I threw one arm over my eyes and smiled wickedly. “Why the fuck do I know how to fight and move like that?” I asked, eyes wide as laughter bubbled from my throat. “Who am I?!” I shouted hysterically. Some pieces of my life seem to make so much sense and others seem to be getting increasingly complicated. How am I suddenly an excellent combat fighter when I haven’t been in any sort of fight, well, ever?

Priya looked at me funny. “I don’t know, Lincoln. It seems like things are a bit more complicated than we think. I’ve never known another deathwalker to move like you just did, like you were born with the innate skill and knowledge to fight. Your body moves like it’s ready for every punch and kick, almost as if it knows all the ways in which gatekeepers were trained when they first came to Earth.” She tapped her finger on her chin as if trying to figure out the puzzle that is me in her head.

“It’s wild because, even if I have this skill and knowledge, my body isn’t ready. I am about to be really freaking sore the next few days. I mean, I do yoga regularly and I did silks for a long time, but I don’t do this. It will take some time for my muscles to adjust to the new types of movement.”

“Well, maybe it won’t, Linc. Deathwalkers have an innate healing ability, so maybe your muscles are repairing and healing as we speak. You seem to have a mix of deathwalker and gatekeeper gifts,” she said.

I sat up and rolled my shoulders.

“Would it be possible for me to be both? Can you be a deathwalker and a gatekeeper? I guess I sort of thought they were two different gifts unable to coexist in the same body, especially since all these gifts are supposed to be hereditary. Am I about to find out that my parents aren’t really my parents? That would be...unexpected. Or maybe some other random twist of fate?” I crossed my legs and leaned back on my hands. Something here didn’t make sense.

I hadn’t really entertained the idea that my parents, maybe, aren’t my birth parents, but at this point in my life, it felt like anything was possible. I wasn’t sure what to make of what, exactly, was happening but it felt like there were more answers waiting to be discovered. I just couldn’t understand what those answers were or how they all fit together.

“I’ve never heard of a random twist of fate quite like that but then again, anything is plausible. Your parents are your birth parents, as far as we know. But in regards to everything else, well, we’ve been in the dark for a decade. No one was prepared for this or has answers about what is going on in the afterlife. So I wouldn’t say that it’s an impossibility, more like it would be highly unlikely. You’re either a deathwalker or a gatekeeper, not both. At least, that’s what we’ve been taught. There have been couples made up of one deathwalker and one gatekeeper and the child, as far as we know, only ever gets one ability,” she said thoughtfully.

I seemed to be an anomaly.

“Maybe I’m gifted. But why gift me something, then hide it for the majority of my life?” I frowned. “That doesn’t make much sense either.”

Why am I the exception to so many random things? What, exactly, am I?

I sighed. I didn’t have answers for a lot of these questions.

“Maybe that’s not the most important thing right now. I just want to learn how to safely go to the afterlife, see what’s up, and help you all fix whatever has been going on for the last ten years. And maybe the queen can help me figure out the rest when we find her.” I chewed on my bottom lip.

“You have a choice, Lincoln. I don’t want you to feel like you don’t. This doesn’t need to be the life you live if you don’t want it. You haven’t known it or grown up with it. Gatekeepers and deathwalkers get to decide whether or not they want this. You’re allowed to live another way,” Priya said seriously. She tensed, her posture rigid like she expected a blow.

“Did you ever consider leaving this life?” I stared at her intently.

This life had caused her great pain and suffering. Her parents, her team, and even her own survival had hung in the balance because of this life. I wouldn’t blame her if she’d been ready to quit. It would be perfectly understandable.

“I did, after what happened six months ago. I haven’t told you this yet because it’s painful for me and I’m still actively grieving, but my team was comprised of my best friends and my girlfriend. Not being able to remember exactly what happened may seem like a blessing to some, but it’s my curse. I can’t remember how she died, how *they* died. The most important people in my whole life were murdered because I wanted to pursue a demon that had been haunting me for so long.” A tear slipped down her cheek and she swiped at it quickly.

“I felt responsible for their deaths, and some days I still do. I want to honor them. I know it’s horrifying, and I’m probably saving myself some heartache by not knowing, but I want to, at least, know what my final words were to them, what they said to me. Amaya and I had been together for two years, and I had been with that team for almost four. After the incident, I was a shell for almost three months. I felt lost and untethered. I barely ate, slept, drank, or went out for those first few months. It was only until month four that I was finally able to go to the bar and bartend. It almost felt like a normal job. I was able to simply exist on the outskirts of our community while I worked through everything that had happened.” Tears were spilling freely now and she let them fall. I wanted to reach out and cup her cheeks in my hands.

“I slowly started to gain back pieces of myself. It kept my mind and body busy. I was able to help without actually having to take action. After five months, I began training again. Then, about a month later, I met someone who gave me hope again. Someone who made the dark days seem less consuming.”

She smiled weakly, her eyes shimmering.

“Priya,” I started but stopped. I didn’t know what to say. Tears slid down my own cheeks in response to hers. We were both filling in the cracks of our own broken pieces.

“The most important people in my life were taken from me. I’ve had to live life without them and learn how to be me again. It hasn’t been perfect. I’m still working on it, but I know that I have to continue moving forward.

I want to love again. I want to fill my life with people who matter again. I loved them, Amaya and my friends. I still do. But I have to try and look to the future. They knew the risks and so did I. I want to find the demon responsible for wreaking havoc on my life and taking away so many of my loved ones. I don't just want to send it back to the afterlife. I want to end it. I want to find a way to wipe it off the face of every realm so it's never to hurt anyone else again," she whispered with steely resolve.

"I understand that. I'll do what I can to help," I promised, grabbing her hand in mine.

"I know that I still have a lot of healing ahead of me, but I want you to know that I am committed to that journey for myself. I want your support and you, Lincoln. I know that it can be difficult to be with someone who is going through the process of grief, but I also know that I am allowed to enjoy happiness and support where I find it. And I found it with you," Priya finished quietly. Her expression was wide open and vulnerable.

"I'm healing, too, and I think as long as we both acknowledge and commit to healing and holding space for ourselves, we can still work towards building something beautiful and joyous together. We are allowed to grow and heal individually as well as explore what it means to love," I said, squeezing her hands tight.

Her eyes widened at the word *love*.

"Er, I mean...I wasn't trying to freak you out. You know what I mean..." I blushed slightly, stumbling through my explanation.

"I know what you mean." She leaned closer. "Lincoln?"

"Yes?"

"Will you be my girlfriend? I don't *just* want to be exclusive-more-than-friends. I'd like to be yours, and you to be mine," she stuttered through her words as if afraid of my answer. Her lips were nearly a breath away from mine.

"I would like that very much," I said, smiling and pressing a light kiss to her lips.

"Me too," she breathed against me as our kiss deepened.

"Can we have sex now, please? I've never had sex with an official 'girlfriend' before, and I feel like I should make sure it's just as pleasing, if not more so, than exclusive-more-than-friends," I said, pulling away and smiling wickedly.

Priya laughed then.



“You’re insatiable. But yes, come on.” She dragged me up and pulled me towards one of the outer walls to a door with no visible handle, which I was just now getting used to.

*Emir Banks-Haldar.*

“Is this your brother’s office, or something? Why does he need an office at every secret place in the GK society?” I gave her an incredulous look.

“Yes, this training room is the one specifically for our branch, so he has an office here.” She shrugged like it was perfectly normal.

“And we’re going to have sex in his *office*?” I gaped at her.

“We sure are,” she said, whispering words over the door and pushing it open. I laughed loudly and tumbled inside after her.

There was a large couch with a coffee table snuggled into one side of the room, and a large desk with two chairs facing it in the other corner. Book shelves and a small bar outlined the walls of the space.

I smiled wickedly at her. “I would very much like to eat you out while your beautiful ass is on that desk,” I said, feeling cheeky.

This time it was Priya’s turn to gape at me.

“Getting confident are we? I won’t complain.” She pulled me in and our lips met in a new dance that was starting to become quite familiar. The way she moved against me, inside me, with me. It was like magic wrapped around my body making my soul feel light, airy, and fulfilled.

I was completely and utterly spellbound.

A warm, fuzzy feeling consumed me the entire way home. It felt *good*, something I hadn't felt in a long time. It's weird to have intimacy that's balanced and focused on my pleasure just as much as Priya's. I've never had that before.

Many parts of my life were confusing right now, like my ability to have both deathwalker and gatekeeper traits, despite no one else having that. Or the fact that I now have great combat skills for no reason. Or that someone had wanted to keep all that a secret from the GK and myself for the first two and a half decades of my life. Other parts of my life seemed to be sliding into place very well, like my relationship with Priya, which is probably why I was so blissfully distracted while walking back to my apartment.

Suddenly, I was yanked back by my hair and slammed face-first into the concrete. I screamed and stars dotted my darkening vision as I was dragged by the base of my head. Pain shot through my entire front side and I could feel the scrape of the sidewalk slicing my skin.

I clawed at the hand, but it didn't feel right and I couldn't get a good angle without dislocating my shoulder. The hand was too slick, almost scaly. I screamed again as my lip split open and blood flooded my mouth. I coughed as my attacker released me, only to have a cold, clammy hand slam over my mouth. The hand was too large and spindly to be human.

I was in a state of shock. The fighting skills that seemed to have appeared with Priya had gone completely absent. I was frozen in space, unable to do anything, as oxygen struggled to reach my brain. I tried not to

hyperventilate from the lack of air. Tears leaked from my eyes and I heard something sniff. Blood from my mouth coated my face and the metallic smell filled my nose.

“Mmmm,” the creature purred.

I almost gagged except I had no air in my lungs. I grabbed at the hand and swung my legs up, attempting to shove my attacker away, but they only chuckled. “Aw, so you can fight? I wasn’t sure what I would stumble upon,” they said in a gravelly voice. The hand released me, and I was pulled up by my legs to dangle in the air, gasping for breath. My vision returned but it felt like I had just gone on an upside-down rollercoaster, and I could barely determine what was right side up. Everything swung around me as I wiggled and squirmed to get a look at what was holding me. I was being turned away.

“Let me see you, you bastard!!” I hissed words finally forming in my mouth. I tried to reach up and claw my way out, only to be released and slammed onto the ground.

“Jesus Christ!” I screamed as my tailbone smashed onto the concrete. My body flopped on the ground as I rolled to the side. More red stained the earth beneath me and I wiped my hand across my face, my palm coming away smeared with red.

“Earth dwellers and their peculiar jargon,” the demon hummed.

Lying on the ground, I looked up at a scaly white creature that seemed to have slits for eyes and holes for a nose. It was like Voldemort and something from *Stranger Things* had a baby, and it was this thing. It was all white with a huge, lipless mouth filled with several rows of teeth. It wore no clothes and had huge claws.

I gasped as pain shot through my body, and I gritted my teeth. Where are my fighting instincts now that I *actually* need them? Additionally, I didn’t have any weapons because Priya said getting my fabric would take a few days and, like a dumb bitch, I didn’t think I’d need anything else until then.

“What do you want from me?” I seethed, and tried to scoot away as it just stood there, tilting its head in curiosity. Black smoke erupted from its body and tried to wrap itself around me. I screamed again, trying to bat it away and not breathe it in, when suddenly, it all disappeared. I shivered as the smoke dissipated, and silently prayed that the smoke wouldn’t kill me.

No longer was the demon standing in front of me, but a handsome man with dark hair, pale skin, and black eyes. How had he changed his body like that? I could still tell he was a demon because of my sight. It was like an oily aura rolled off of him, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“Can you grow wings?” I blurted out, suddenly wondering how anyone could discern between demons if they can change forms. But maybe this demon is *the* demon that Priya’s after? A girl could hope.

“What an odd question. Only the gifted have the ability to use wings.” He tilted his angular face to the side. He was handsome, in a villain type of way. He wore all black and when he smiled, his teeth narrowed into sharp fangs. “I wanted to see you for myself, angel.”

I nearly gagged. “Please do *not* call me any creepy pet names,” I shuddered, pushing myself up and getting ready to run. My body begged me to stay on the ground, but I was not taking my chances with this thing when it was so interested in splatting me across the sidewalk and, apparently, my body can’t be bothered to remember how to fight when I really needs to.

“What is a pe—?” He didn’t finish the sentence because suddenly, Elijah was there and he looked pissed. His eyes flashed with something like fear, or worry, and he roared. He seemed to glow as his icy power punched into me and I fell to the ground again.

“Goddamn it!” I yelled in pain as my body became all too familiar with the pavement once more.

There was a snarl and scream as Elijah slammed his palm into the demon’s chest, and he evaporated back into that black smoke, then nothing.

“What in the actual *fuck* is going on?” I snarled, pushing myself up from the ground. Again.

“You’re welcome,” he said, smirking.

“We were just talking,” I grumbled as I rubbed my ass. It was obviously a lie, but I didn’t like Elijah at all, and I certainly didn’t want to feel like I owed him anything for saving my life.

“What did he say?” he asked seriously, turning that icy sharpness to me.

I squinted at him. There was something not right about him. I just didn’t know what it was. He had saved me from that heinous creature, but

why? I felt like Elijah was one step away from deciding I wasn't worth protecting. Then what? Would he slide a knife into my back without a second thought and walk away unscathed?

"Nothing. The bastard grabbed my hair and called me 'angel,' which is something I would like scrubbed from my brain pretty much immediately." I turned around and realized that I was no longer on my path home, but in some abandoned alley I didn't recognize. What is it with demons and magical beings dragging me off to unknown parts of the city?

"Where am I?" I asked, suddenly a bit scared. I didn't like being alone with Elijah. It felt like I was walking too close to the sun.

"He transported you here so you wouldn't call attention to yourself and alert any gatekeepers." He said it like it was so obvious. I wanted to slap the smile right off of his dumb face.

"Great. But where am I? I'd like to go home." I turned to the right and walked towards the closest street. I was getting really tired of getting lost in my city.

"Lincoln." Elijah grabbed my arm. His hand was freezing for a split second, then oozed warmth. It was a very possessive hold.

"Who are you, really, Elijah? Why are you here? Who am I, for that matter?" I yanked my arm with little luck of ripping it free. Where is my badass strength and power? Does it just turn on and off like a freaking light switch?

"Let go of me!" I said frantically. I struggled against him. He let go suddenly, making me fall to the ground again. "I swear to fucking god if I hit this goddamn cement one more time with my ass, I am going to motherfucking lose it!" I growled.

"I am your protector, like I said before."

"But why? Why do I need a protector? Because I'm the last deathwalker ever? Or the only one now? Or because I'm a special deathwalker-gatekeeper combo? Or what?! What makes me so goddamn special that I need a protector?" I snarled, wanting to throw something at his stupid face.

"Nothing makes you special."

I didn't know if that was actually hurtful or comforting.

"Why didn't I have access to my sight until someone opened my mind? Are my parents even my real parents? Why do I need someone like you?" I cried out, determined to get something out of him.

“Your parents are your real parents.”

Again, he answered *one* question.

“So how am I a deathwalker, then? I was told it was hereditary, and earlier today I had, like, super spidey fighting sense that apparently just come and go whenever it feels like it. So, do I have a little gatekeeper physical magic too? What is actually going on in my body here?!” I folded my arms across my chest and squared my shoulders to him.

“Deathwalker abilities can be gifted. Yours were gifted to you,” he said cautiously. Again, he only answered one damn question at a time.

“Why?”

“Because you aren’t special. You are simply like anyone else, hardly noticeable if you aren’t looking.” He spoke casually, like he was commenting on the weather.

“I don’t even know what to say to that...besides, it’s sort of rude to say I’m not worth noticing.” Anger filled my body and I clenched my fists trying to breathe through it.

“Honestly, if you aren’t going to help me get answers then get the fuck out of my face. I’m done with this. I’m going to the afterworld and speaking with the queen, myself.”

His eyes zeroed in on me, and he smirked. “I would suggest not going by yourself, Lincoln. Your gatekeeper can’t go unless invited, but I can go with you. Just tell me when and where. I’ll escort you there, myself.”

I swallowed and took a step back.

He seemed too eager, but I’d be going alone anyways. At least I knew he could pack a punch. Maybe he would give me more answers.

“I don’t trust you, though,” I said, putting distance between us.

“You don’t need to. I haven’t hurt you yet, right? I don’t plan on letting any harm come your way. But don’t take me up on my offer. Good luck navigating the chaos,” he said, and started to walk away.

Fuck. No one knew what was waiting there for me, and if the monsters I *had* encountered painted any sort of picture, it didn’t seem good.

“Shit, fine. Okay. I am not ready to go now. But I will be. Soon. How do I tell you?” I frowned.

“Speak it out loud: ‘Elijah I am ready to go to the afterworld.’ Don’t take too long because more things like what I stopped will come looking for you, and I won’t always be around to help.” He spoke slyly, like he was in on some big secret.

“I thought you were supposed to....”

With a snap of his fingers, he was gone and I was standing in my room.

“...protect me...bastard. I didn’t get any fucking answers.”

“Lincoln?” Mara said, knocking on my door.

“Hey,” I replied as she opened the door and gaped at the blood on my face and body.

“What happened to you? I didn't think you were home! Did this happen in here?” she looked around frantically, but my room was all in proper order.

“No, I wasn’t here until about sixty seconds ago. I’m okay, just beaten up and sore, but my body will recover quickly. I met a demon and he kicked my ass,” I pouted, and I glanced at my reflection in the mirror with a wince. Damn, I looked pretty bad. Blood was smeared across my face and my lip was bloody and swollen. The rest of me looked like I had been flattened to roadkill, then dragged for several miles.

“What happened, Lincoln? How did you get in here, then?” She walked over to me like she was approaching a wild animal.

“Honestly, I don’t know. My guardian angel *poofed* me in,” I said, sitting gently on my bed. Mara nodded and said, “Give me one minute.”

I stared blankly at the door until she came back, wondering how I was going to deal with all this. Why was I attacked? Why did Elijah even exist in my life? And what, exactly, could I actually accomplish in the afterlife?

Mara came back in and gently closed the door. She had a wet rag and our first aid kit in her hands. She sighed. “You look like you’ve been through some things, want to talk about it? Or is it super top secret death-stuff?” she asked gently, wiping away the blood on my face.

I laughed, then winced because everything hurt.

“My life is weird right now,” I whispered. Mara gave me a sympathetic smile.

“I know. What extra weird thing happened today?” She offered a soft smile in return.

“Well, Priya and I are officially dating, and having sex with a woman is much more satisfying than a man,” I said offhandedly.

Mara chuckled. “I’m happy for you, but I was talking in regards to this.” She held up the bloody rag.

“Well, a demon attacked me and body-slammed me to the concrete, then Elijah popped in and saved me. Then he said, and I quote, that I am

‘like everybody else and not special at all,’ which is, like, an oddly specific and weird thing to say. His words, not mine. What do you think that means, exactly? He said nobody would ever notice me if they weren’t looking.” Something about the way he said it was rubbing me the wrong way, like it meant something very specific but I didn’t understand what it was.

“I don’t know, Linc. Seems like he’s just kind of a dick with a hidden agenda.” She furrowed her brows and applied some ointment to my split lip.

“Exactly. *And* I found out that Priya’s girlfriend and best friends died about six months ago from a demon attack. I want to help her kill that particular demon,” I said, a bit detached.

“Damn, that’s heavy. I thought you couldn’t kill demons, only send them back to their hell-prison?” she questioned.

I’d been updating her and talking her through the information I was learning. She’s the only one who knows everything about me. I was so thankful that she actually listened and believed me.

“You’re right. I don’t think demons can actually be fully killed, only trapped back in the afterlife. But I’m going to go to the afterlife to get some answers about who I am and why these attacks are happening. Oh, and apparently I have an inherent knowledge of how to fight?” I said, still not understanding why my ass had been handed to me today. Why had that ability suddenly gone out the door when I was demon-mugged today? It was like the tether I had to that part of myself snapped. I subconsciously reached for it now, and found it.

Weird.

“And you know, the demon attack, which should have been fine but my spy senses got turned off somehow.”

“Jesus, Linc, this is a weird day,” Mara said, finishing up with my face.

I looked up at her and burst out laughing. Then whined. Laughing hurt my lip.

“Actually, yes. Yes it is,” I said as she cracked a smile and started giggling, too.

I sighed and pushed myself up.

“‘Anyways, what’s new with you?’” I asked.

“Oh boy, have I got a fun pharmaceutical story for you.” She winked, and I laughed loudly as she proceeded to tell me about her day.



It felt good to be normal again with my best friend.  
Even if it was only for a moment.

Priya and I were spending the night at the bar again. It had become like a second home. I had met quite a few gatekeepers by now and it was like going to college again, trying to remember who everyone was, what job they had, if they had any special gift, and other random details. Most of them were kind and accepting, some seemed a bit perturbed by my presence, and others seemed to ooze pity or sympathy for Priya.

I hadn't realized before how grief hung around her. It seemed like everyone probably knew and didn't know how to talk to her about it. Priya was royally pissed at Elijah and concerned for me when I had walked in with my split lip and marred face. I had filled her in on what happened, and now we were telling Emir, who leaned against the front of his desk rubbing his chin. He had been horrified, too, when he saw what shape I was in, but there wasn't much to do about it now except let it heal. It seemed like my healing abilities had really been amped up because I cut my leg shaving the other day, and it healed in, a couple of hours. So I was sure I'd be back to normal soon enough.

"I hate to say it, but it actually sort of makes sense to let him help you, Lincoln. We don't know what you are getting into but we, at least, know he is invested in protecting you, maybe on orders from the queen herself? Maybe you're being called to her? Either way I think we should prepare to send you in a month, if you're okay with that. I was able to fulfill your request for the special silk fabric, and I think training for a month with Priya will prepare you in the best way we know how, especially since you

already seem to have an ingrained ability to fight like a gatekeeper. We might finally get the answers we've been looking for all these years in just a month's time," he said thoughtfully, though his gaze was distant.

Maybe he was thinking about his parents. Or all the deathwalkers that were lost all those years ago. Or all the horrible heartache that followed him and Priya around.

I felt incredibly torn in two. The gatekeepers seemed to have this idea that I was someone who could help save them, even though no one explicitly said that. Then Elijah was over here telling me I'm perfectly normal, totally average. It was a strange dichotomy to navigate.

"Linc?" Priya asked, concern drawing across her brow.

"Yeah?" I drew my attention back to them.

"Are you ready to train today? Or is something on your mind?" She reached for my hand, threading her fingers through mine.

"It's nothing. Let's go practice so I won't be caught helpless once again." Smiling, I moved towards the door.

"I know this is a lot, Lincoln. We are really grateful to have you here and we really appreciate you being patient with us as we navigate everything that's going on," Emir said.

I'm sure his words were meant to be encouraging, but it made the impending trip to the afterworld seem more anxiety inducing. This was a huge deal and I knew they were trying not to overwhelm me, but they also couldn't downplay how monumental this was.

I nodded. "Of course," I said, trying not to let my panic show.

They could only help so much. They had never been to the afterworld. They only have what their texts tell them, and no one knows what pandemonium reigns there since shit hit the fan almost ten years ago. I was going in blind, we all were.

It seemed like the only person super confident in the whole thing was Elijah, and that thought wasn't comforting at all. He is suspicious and vague in the most annoying way. Was he actually helping me, or protecting his own self-interest? Or maybe both?

My head was spinning just thinking about it. Priya deserves answers. So does Emir, Grey, and everyone else. She deserves some damn closure as to why that demon had been showing up every five years in her life, only to rip away the people she loves most, and almost kill her in the process.

Priya and I walked in silence through the directory hall to the training facility and I gasped as we entered. In the middle of the room, they'd rigged up the beautiful yards of black silk fabric I requested. I was told it could even change colors with a spell.

"You mentioned that you hadn't practiced with the fabric in a while, so I thought it might make you happy to get familiar with it once more before we start training in combat and treating it like a weapon," Priya said with a small smile.

I walked over to it and let the silky fabric slip through my fingers and closed my eyes.

"When I started silks, it was the first time I felt like I could really be artistic and beautiful with my body. I felt accepted by the community in a way I never had before. It made me feel strong and magical. Fat *and* beautiful. That, for the first time, it didn't matter what size I was because *anyone* was welcome to the stage despite their differences. It was the first time I really learned to love my body for what it could do and the shapes it could make, despite what society told me I should look like on the outside."

I exhaled loudly.

I don't often talk about my journey. To get to the point where I loved and accepted myself, it was a constant work in progress. People often invalidated my journey to body acceptance or told me things like "don't refer to yourself as fat," as if it's some horrible thing instead of just a neutral descriptor.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," Priya said in my ear as she slipped her arms around me from behind. "The world is misguided and rooted, so deeply, in problematic ideologies. It makes me so happy to hear that this gives you joy and comfort. Your feelings are valid and so are you." She planted a kiss at the base of my neck, where it meets my shoulder. "Can I see?" she whispered, her breath skating across my skin.

"Yes, yes you can." I squeezed her hands with my own and stepped away from her. I went through some warm-ups on the ground and in the air. Then, I took out my phone and started playing a song that I'd choreographed a piece to a few years back. I rolled my shoulders and stepped up to the fabric once more, clutching it in my hands, and began to climb. For the next several minutes, I lost myself to the music and the

fabric, wrapping myself in its silkiness as I twirled, dropped, and floated above the ground.

I moved in ways that called to my body and made shapes that made Priya gasp and applaud. I laughed loudly when I took a drop from the top of the fabric all the way to a foot off the ground catching myself.

I was sweating by the end and carefully untangled myself, smiling. My body complained, but my heart sang.

Priya stood back with her mouth wide open and her eyes shining. "That was truly the most magnificent thing I have ever seen! I didn't know you were so talented. You nearly brought tears to my eyes!" she said, shaking her head and falling to her knees.

"You know, people do that with chains as well," I said sitting in front of her.

"I don't know about that," she said, laughing.

"We could be our own traveling act if this doesn't work out," I teased.

"As long as I get to be with you, I think I could manage just fine." She leaned forward, kissing me gently. It sent butterflies skirting through my belly as she gently wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, while the other skimmed my arm.

"Why is it that, every time we kiss, I feel like I'm swooning?" I murmured against her lips. Her loud throat-laugh erupted and I took the opportunity to shut her up with my own swoon-worthy kisses.

"I could say the same thing about you, my love." We tumbled to the floor.

"What else can you do on the fabric?" Her gaze was mischievous. "No wonder you're so flexible in bed," she teased.

I shoved her lightly as giggles erupted. "Just you wait, Priya Banks-Haldar. You haven't seen anything yet." I winked and pushed myself up, tangling myself in the silks once more.

“Are you ready?” Priya asked.

I nodded as we stood in front of a huge mirror. Today’s lesson is about portals. We were using the mirror to access the afterlife and travel between realms. We had been doing physical training for a while now, but this was my first magic lesson.

“Just place your hand on it and say, ‘Go in peace.’” We stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing our reflections.

“You always speak in another language when you do magic or gatekeeper-y things,” I said, frowning.

“I speak in Latin because it’s how I was taught. You can say it in any language. As long as you have the power of the sight, it’ll work.” She nodded encouragingly.

“Well, that’s fucking cool,” I mumbled. “You sound like a badass when you say it. It won’t be nearly as fancy as when I do it.”

“When we utter those words, it opens a portal into the afterworld that any entity with afterworld magic can go through. Gatekeepers don’t technically have afterworld magic. Our magic was gifted to us, and strengthened, by the mortal realm. Deathwalkers, demons, ghosts, and wraiths all have magic drawn from the afterworld, so it will accept you. This is a one-way portal as well, which is why, when they go through it, the opening automatically closes until you speak the words again. Most ghosts and wraiths are simply in need of a guide because they don’t have the ability to create a portal themselves, so they are excited to see you and

connect with you as their energies want to return to the afterworld.” I nodded trying to wrap my head around it all. It seemed simple enough.

“Demons typically don’t want to be sent back because they’re imprisoned. So instead of ‘Go in peace,’ we have to touch both our hands to the mirror and say, ‘Reclaim what is yours, and bring peace,’ which means you have to have a mirror large enough to place both hands fully on the mirror. It also can’t be glass. It has to be a true mirror, with no cracks. Demons will often try to smash mirrors or crack them as they move throughout the mortal realm. It renders the portal ineffective and, therefore, they can’t be sent back.”

Unbroken big mirror. *Got it.* I nodded as she continued to talk.

“When you say, ‘Reclaim what is yours,’ the afterworld will reach out for the demon and pull them in by force, as opposed to saying ‘Go in peace,’ which is almost like a gentle invitation or a warm caress. One is like, ‘Get the hell back here,’ and the other is like, ‘Welcome nice to see you,’” She said smirking slightly.

I gave her a thumbs-up. Okay, this didn’t seem too complicated.

“Want to give it a go?” she asked

“Yes. Okay, so Test One...Go in peace,” I whispered as I laid my hand across the cool mirror. It seemed to glow, emitting a warm aura. I felt inclined to walk through. I could feel the cool surface start to gently beckon me in, and I pushed my hand through until it was up to my wrist. “Holy shit.” I whispered. It felt like a dive into a beautiful pool of water.

Priya smiled and pressed her hand an inch from mine but nothing happened. “See, I am not permitted. But you are, Linc.”

I put both hands on it and said, “Reclaim what is yours, and bring peace.”

The energy immediately changed and I fell headfirst into the mirror as my hands were aggressively pulled by something on the other side. I screamed as I was sucked through to my waist. Purple smoke, mixed with an acidic scent, flooded my senses. It burned my eyes and throat as my body was yanked possessively. I couldn’t even see my own hands but I felt something wrap viciously around my wrists. It was cold and unyielding as it pulled me even harder.

The hands around my waist slipped to my hips, digging into my sides hard enough to leave bruises until I felt something cold slither around my midsection. A huge pull launched me backwards as what felt like chains

dug into my skin and yanked me away. I sprawled in front of the mirror once again, with Priya's chains snaked around my legs and hips. She panted, frantically looking at the mirror.

"Love, are you...?" She didn't finish the sentence. The mirror filled with that same purple smoke. It beat against the surface like it was trying to escape. Dark handprints dripping with thick liquid pounded in aggressive thuds against the glass.

I screamed and scrambled back as Priya protectively drew her chains up and around her. She thrust her hand out and her chains smashed against the surface shattering the image in an instant.

"What the fuck?" I said, standing up.

"I'm sorry, I'm sure my chains left some bruises. I was so afraid you'd be pulled in. It felt like something was taking you." Priya turned to me, running her hands down my face and arms in featherlight touches.

Two angry red marks formed at my wrists like I had been burned by a pair of handcuffs. The pain was slowly fading due to my magic, but I could still feel the grip on them like a ghost.

"I couldn't see anything. The smoke was everywhere when I fell in and something was pulling me in, like I might've seriously been ripped in two," I whispered as I leaned my forehead against hers. "What happened?" I asked, pulling away to look into her gold eyes.

"I don't know. It pulls demons in, but it shouldn't pull you in. You could use it as a portal but it's a one-way door, so you wouldn't come back and the portal would break whenever your hands leave the mirror from the mortal realm. Once your whole body is in, you can't come back this way." She furrowed her brow.

"So one hand has to stay connected for the peaceful exit and two have to stay connected for the bad one? That seems...not helpful." I scowled.

"Agreed, but in order for the afterworld to suck the demon back in, it needs to ground its power in the portal opener and act as a conduit," she said, rubbing her temple.

"How do I open a two-way portal? Didn't you say my physical body would stay here as a deathwalker?" I pursed my lips trying to wrap my head around it.

"Yes, you have to put both hands up and say, 'Grant me permission to enter and return.' You choose something to act as a beacon; a small token that your physical body will tether to in the mortal realm as your energy



goes into the afterworld. Most people choose something sentimental, like a necklace or family heirloom. We charm it with a spell. Then, a gatekeeper keeps it safe for you. You entrust them with your token and your physical body while you leave to the afterworld. So, essentially, once you've gone through the passage, the token acts as a lighthouse. It will keep you connected to your body here. That way, as soon as you enter the mortal realm, you will go to your token, which should be with your physical body if the gatekeeper does their job correctly."

It seemed like there were so many specific rules, but I suppose when you grow up knowing them, it doesn't seem so excruciatingly detailed.

"From there, you can only exit the same way you came in. You are connected to the portal, so as long as you can get back to it, you will be able to return. Gatekeepers, when invited, keep their physical bodies. It's why they cannot stay for extended periods of time. They need the queen's protection. She protects their physical body while they move around the afterlife, so they won't wither away and die."

"That seems like a lot of rules," I said, looking at the cracked mirror again.

"It's very specific." She studied the mirror as well. "I don't know what that was. The handprints and smoke...I've never seen anything like that. Normally, portals can only be opened on Earth to the afterlife. It's far more complex to open a portal from the afterlife back to Earth, and requires an immense amount of power. If the powers of the afterlife are able to more easily access the mortal realm, I would assume it means something is wrong with the barriers put into place by the queen. Which is not good...That could possibly mean the destruction of the mortal realm as the afterlife bleeds into this one. The afterlife is meant as a place of rest and peace, not for the continued chaos that plagues this earth."

"It definitely feels like some shit is going down," I said. It felt like we were running out of time. I was leaving in a few short weeks, and I was terrified of what I would find.

"Let's find you a beacon and keep working with your fabric. I want you to be as protected as possible going into this," Priya said, giving the mirror one last look before she turned to me.

"I'm scared," I chewed on my bottom lip.

"Me too," Priya said quietly.

“What if I can’t fix anything? Or I just get myself stuck or killed? What if the queen isn’t able to communicate with me? Or what if a demon attacks me?” My chest tightened and my mind started spiraling; I needed something to grab on to, to ground me.

“Lincoln,” Priya said, grabbing my hands. “The only thing I know is that we will do this together and I will protect you until my dying breath. I promise you that.” She studied me intently.

“But you can’t come with me,” I said, feeling my heart cleave in two.

“Physically, I won’t be there, but I’ll be here.” She splayed her hand across my heart. “And despite the disgusting oddity that is Elijah, he will be there and he is invested in protecting you. We will make it back to one another no matter what, through this life and the one after,” she said gravely.

“Through this life and the one after,” I repeated.

We walked away from the broken mirror and I couldn’t help but look back once more, expecting to see something leering behind the cracks. But all I saw was my own fear, reflected on my face.

**M**y next few weeks became a whirlwind of training with Priya, researching the afterworld, reading accounts of deathwalkers, and distracting myself from the impending doom at the end of the week. I would be traveling to the afterworld in just a couple of days. I didn't know if I was really ready, but I sure as hell would give it my best effort.

I hadn't seen Elijah since that day almost a month ago, but I knew if I called him he would come. I didn't want him to show up if he wasn't going to answer any of my questions though. He had something bubbling underneath the surface that made me want to squirm and punch him in his ignorant mouth. He would act as my guide in the afterlife and that would be it. I hoped that when I meet the queen I can humbly ask her to get him off my ass.

He seemed too eager to go with me, but at least he actually knows more about the afterlife than the gatekeepers do. I could only find accounts in books that recalled deathwalkers' experiences and the occasional invitation extended to the gatekeepers.

One afternoon I grilled Priya about the queen.

"Okay so, let me tell you what I've learned and maybe you can help add some additional information?" I asked.

"Let's hear it, love," she replied.

"Everything about the queen describes her as 'peaceful.' Not dark and scary doom-death-talk like I would expect. If you were called, you would pop in to the queen's residence and someone would walk you through?"

Priya nodded and I kept rolling along.

“And the actual residence of the afterlife changes based on the fashions of the decade. The afterlife evolves just like we do on Earth. But no one goes outside of her royal highness’ manor because no one knows what lies outside of her estate. You show up, do your thing, and leave?” I asked. I wanted to have as many details sorted out as I could before I actually ended up in the afterlife myself.

“The only stories I read that described anything outside the queen’s home were about villages full of death. There are very few accounts of people going farther out and being greeted by small villages or beautiful natuescapes like gardens, forests, and mountains. Most stories talk about how tranquil and welcoming death is, not like the fiery pits of doom we were taught in Sunday school.” She winked and I gave a small chuckle. “Let’s not forget the demon prisons though. That sort of gives me hell-hath-no-fury vibes,” I said, tapping my chin.

“Yes, the demon dungeon is probably the closest thing to the version of hell we learn about in modern day religions. The queen’s power keeps them all in their cages and her manor acts as an additional magical barrier because the dungeon is deep underground of her estate. A lot of her magical power is delegated to keep demons from escaping, which is why it’s so rare that one escapes from her grip. Visitors are not allowed, and armed magical guards are supposed to be there twenty-four seven.” She pursed her lips as if trying to puzzle out how any demon could escape a fortress like that.

“How could any demons have the ability to escape all that?” I questioned.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. Another mystery we’d been trying to figure out in the last month. I left that conversation with Priya a little more uneasy than when we started. I didn’t want to press any more and remind her of her own grief, so I went back to my own research once again.

There were so many unknowns and I was, truthfully, terrified of what I would find when I arrived in the afterworld. The queen seemed amicable, but the rest of the afterworld was one big question mark.

It seemed like, up until the event a decade ago, the queen would invite gatekeepers and deathwalkers to the afterlife fairly regularly to consult

them, touch base, and better understand the dealings of Earth. It was a very amicable relationship based on mutual respect and trust for one another.

Based on my sleuthing, all the accounts of the queen seemed pleasant, kind, and compassionate. Another interesting tidbit was that everyone saw something different in the queen, as if they saw what would make them feel most comfortable. Sometimes she was described as a young woman, other times an older maid, always with kind eyes and a warm smile. It was strange to wonder what she actually looks like.

What does the queen look like when she's simply being herself? Does that version of her actually exist?

The angels of death were mentioned early in the texts, but rarely within the last one hundred years or so. The queen had guards, but none with wings. I wondered idly if they simply hid them or if the angels of death were what people wanted to see instead of the reality. Perhaps the wings aren't necessary anymore. According to the texts, everything else in the afterlife evolved regularly, so why not the angels of death?

Additionally, I found out that the queen's immortal, so there's no need for her to mother children because she's always tied and destined to the throne. The afterlife is a matriarch through and through and cannot be ruled by anyone else but her.

It made me feel marginally better to understand the history of what I was going into, but it also clearly highlighted why the last twenty-five years were so strange. First with the extremely violent demon attacks, then with the disappearance of the deathwalkers and the shut off of their hereditary powers. It all seemed out of sorts in comparison to the niceties of the thousands of years prior. No wonder the gatekeepers were eager and excited for a new deathwalker face.

During my research, I had also reached out to Emir and Grey. Emir had been busy but Grey said, "Yes, Lincoln. All of this is incredibly strange. People downplay how odd it is because they don't want to create panic or fear, but this shit is fucked up and scary. It gives people hope to know that we have someone who can access the afterlife and possibly find answers."

I tried not to feel like the weight of their world, and now mine, really was on my shoulders. I didn't realize that everyone thought this was extremely peculiar until I read through the history. Literally nothing like this has ever happened before. Nothing has disrupted the balance before so what, exactly, is happening now? The system was built to uphold peace

and resilience, so what on earth has changed to make it so catastrophically different? I can't imagine being in the dark for this long. How incredibly exhausting and relentless these events must be for the gatekeepers.

After all these conversations, I felt better having some background knowledge but my anxiety continued to rise, especially considering something had tried to drag my ass through the portal Priya and I opened previously. If the queen needs a deathwalker, why hasn't she sent an invitation? What exactly was going on down there?

*Ugh.*

Everyone needed answers, including me.

It's wild that the mortal realm had no idea anything was amiss because humans had no idea about any of it. I mean, hell, I didn't know anything about it until just a few months ago. The world could explode with demons one day and people would, literally, never see it coming. I didn't know how Priya and everyone else had been so calm about the whole thing until I showed up and became a catalyst for something more. I tried to just breathe through it all and not let anxiety cripple me, which is why training had been such a lovely distraction.

I had gotten pretty good at using my silks similarly to the way Priya maneuvered with her chains. We even spelled them to shrink and change color on my whim so I could wear them around my body like clothing. Additionally, I had chosen a beacon. It was a small crystal pendant my mom had given me. Priya was wearing it around her chains, as I had asked her to keep it safe since she would be the one to watch over my body with Emir and Grey.

"I think we deserve a night of fun from all the work we've been doing and the doom-and-gloom of the afterworld," I said as we faced each other on my bed.

"Agreed. What would you like to do, love?" She leaned in close to me, playing with the strands of my hair.

"What's your favorite place in the city?" I smiled at her.

"My favorite place?" she repeated, thinking.

"Oooh wait, I have an idea. Are you up for a little bit of adventure?" She sat up and moved off the bed.

"I would love nothing more, where are we going?"

"I'll be back in one hour. Put on something fancy." She winked. "I have a surprise for you." Before I could ask anything else, she was out the door

calling back, "Sixty minutes, Lincoln. Be ready!"

I laughed as I took the challenge in stride and began to busy myself by finding an outfit that would knock Priya's socks off. Once satisfied, I sat on the bed and waited for Priya to come back. I'd left the door unlocked so she could just walk in. I'd decided on a sleeveless black bodycon dress that accentuated my curves, and I'd artfully wrapped my silks around my arms like sleeves so I wouldn't feel vulnerable or unprotected. I'd slipped on some strappy maroon sandals and pulled my dark waves back into a low ponytail. My makeup was the perfect smokey eyes with bright red lips.

I looked damn good.

I was just touching up my hair when an icy blast of power surged through the room moments before Elijah entered. I didn't turn around. I simply continued to primp and preen. I would not give him the satisfaction of my undivided attention.

"Are you just going to sit there or are you going to say something?" I asked, casually turning around to see him lounging on my bed once I'd finished. I really fucking hated when he did that.

"I was just admiring you, is all," he said with a wink. He wore black slacks and a short-sleeved button-down, which had the top few buttons undone.

"Thanks. I thought you said I was barely noticeable. Did you change your mind?" I raised a brow at him, hoping to get some clue as to what he meant. Any reaction could help me better understand his end goal.

"You were when you were a child. All babies are made relatively equal. Little blobs with hardly anything differentiating them at all. It was like picking a random child out of a patch. You seemed the most inconspicuous." He shrugged like it was no big deal.

"Why would a child need to be inconspicuous?" I asked. A gnawing feeling grew in my stomach. He spoke in such weird, roundabout ways, but I knew it all fit together in a bigger picture. It was just impossible to solve a puzzle without knowing the important pieces.

"Because we didn't want others to find you before you were ready." His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. "Enjoy your evening tonight. I assume you will call me soon for your journey to the afterlife. Dress accordingly," he said before I blinked and he was gone.

"What does one wear to the afterlife?" I rolled my eyes.

He was the most unhelpful, frustrating being ever.

I took a deep breath and told myself to stop worrying about it. There wasn't a damn thing I could do now other than enjoy this evening with Priya and do my best to be ready when the time came.

"I can do this," I whispered to myself as I pulled out my phone, calling Priya to tell her to hurry her ass up.



**E** *MERGENCY MEETING. DIRECTORY HALL NOW.*

I blinked down at my phone the same moment Priya walked back through my door, looking breathtaking in a flowy dark purple dress. It skimmed her sides, almost floating around her ankles. Her chains were wrapped loosely around her waist and she wore black pumps. She had rings and bracelets decorating her hands and wrists. I wanted to run my finger along the tiny straps of her gown and let it all pool at her feet.

“Well, damn,” I gaped at her, my mouth wide open. She smiled and reached her hands out to me. I grabbed them and held tight.

“You too, love. You too,” she whispered.

“What, exactly, constitutes as an *emergency*?” I asked slowly, feeling like I was not going to like the answer.

“The last time we had one, a large and dangerous demon was loose, so it can’t be good.” She sighed. Her eyes looked distant, like the past was haunting her.

“Maybe they won’t need us and we can just show up then slip out,” I said without much confidence. I was the only deathwalker in the USA branch that I knew of, possibly the whole GK Society. I’d been flying under the radar at my own pace up until now. It was no surprise that, eventually, that convenience would run out and I would be expected to act, to do something more. I was planning on doing it on my own time, but maybe that luxury expired.

Priya gave me a sad smile.

“Right. Well, let’s go,” I took her hand in mine and we headed out.



THE BAR HAD A LARGE “CLOSED” sign on it but people were slipping in. Emir was standing outside looking like a bouncer, tapping his foot.

“Pri! Linc! Thank god. I was worried. You didn’t answer my texts!” He wrapped Priya in a hug, then squeezed my shoulder.

“Sorry. Priya was driving and I wasn’t paying attention to my phone,” I said. I looked down at my screen and realized I had missed five texts from him. I winced. Probably should’ve been paying more attention.

“What’s going on?” Priya asked.

“There’s been a report of a large influx of afterworld activity all over the world, a full-scale global meeting was called. Hurry and go in through the door in my office. It leads to the meeting where the board members and head council are,” he said.

My mouth dropped open for the second time this evening.

The council only met annually and the board of directors met about the same. A global meeting was practically unheard of. It was dangerous to have everyone in the same place at the same time. Too much history and knowledge in one space could invite trouble.

“Everyone is going to be in the same place?” I asked incredulously as Priya hurried us along, following the shuffle of people through the directory hall.

“They will broadcast it for everyone to tune in. We will be in attendance at the actual meeting since our part in this is important,” she said. Priya glanced side-to-side with worry etched on her face. A new door had appeared in the middle of Emir’s office. The directory hall was so expansive. Doors could be created for anywhere at anytime, it seemed.

“What do you think is going on?” I asked. The door was right in front of Emir’s desk and said: *Level Five Security Door, Invitation Only*.

“I don’t know. But, because you are the only deathwalker in the entire world that we know of right now, I’m sure they’ll want something from you.” Her eyes focused wearily on me. She looked exhausted and scared, like she was afraid of what would come next.

My eyes widened at her comment. It was one thing to be here with Priya and Emir and the GKs. It was another thing for high-level leaders in the Society to know who I am because I’m simply the only deathwalker

left. No one had said those words out loud yet, even if I knew it. I naively thought that I could operate without calling attention to myself.

“I never really thought of it that way,” I whispered, looking at the door like it might spontaneously burst into flames.

“We didn’t want to overwhelm you,” Priya said, looking at me like I was a frightened caged animal.

“Right. Well, okay,” I mumbled. I wasn’t often at a loss for words but I was right now.

“Together?” Priya wrapped her arm around me.

I nodded and we stepped up to the door. Our names were required for entrance.

“Priya Banks-Haldar.”

“Lincoln Matsen.”

The door glowed a fluorescent blue and slid open to reveal darkness. I took a breath and stepped through.

The blackness cleared in a flash of light, and a small man waited for us on the other side.

“This way, please.” He nodded curtly and began to lead us down a narrow hallway to another door. “Take your assigned seats and we will begin as soon as the last representative arrives.” He disappeared the way he came. The door in front of us slid open to reveal a huge lecture-style hall. Many seats were already filled. The head counsel and board of directors were seated around a stage in a semicircle at the room’s center.

Mine and Priya’s names were in the front row. That felt intimidating.

I swept my gaze back and forth and concluded that there were about three hundred people here of different shapes, sizes, and shades. We settled in and I noticed that Emir’s name was on the other side of Priya’s.

The auditorium filled with noise and the nervous energy permeated the air, making me jumpy. Emir showed up about ten minutes later and the last few seats started to fill. A woman in a hijab stood up in the center of the counsel and snapped her fingers. A hush fell over the crowd as a thick feeling of magic consumed the space.

“That’s the head of the entire counsel, Amira,” Priya whispered.

“Thank you all for gathering swiftly and calmly.” She swept her hands out and smiled at us but she didn’t seem happy. She was concerned, irritated, and on edge.

“As you all know, the last decade has been building up to something we could not fully know. We have been working tirelessly to establish connections back to the afterworld and the queen. We have done so, painstakingly, without much luck. The epicenter is upon us. As we speak, demons are crawling about and we are asking you to mobilize all of your task forces. It is of the utmost importance that you remain calm and competent leaders. We do not know what will happen to this realm or the afterworld, but we must protect Earth’s people, *our* people, at all costs,” she said.

A silence filled the space like time had frozen, like all the air had been sucked out of the room and I could barely breathe.

“Demons are incredibly dangerous. We will lose some of our fellow comrades, but you are capable and trained warriors. We must keep our legacy alive.” Her voice grew louder and more passionate as she spoke. I felt like I was watching the end of the world play out. “We will do whatever we need to do to ensure our survival in the mortal realm,” she continued, her dark eyes scanning the crowd until they landed on me.

I wanted to shrink in my chair.

“Which is why the counsel, board of directors, and I have decided that the time for our deathwalker to enter the afterworld is now. Lincoln Matsen, come forward.” Priya and Emir tensed next to me.

I knew she had called my name, but I couldn’t get my limbs to obey me as I stared at her. I had dumbly thought that I wouldn’t be called to be a hero.

She looked at me expectantly and finally, my brain started working properly again. I pulled myself up and walked forward, taking her outstretched hand. Suddenly, I was self-conscious of the bodycon dress I was wearing that was supposed to be for my and Priya’s date. I looked back to see Priya with tears slipping down her cheeks. Emir whispered feverishly in her ear. We all thought we’d have more time.

The air turned cold and a crack sounded through the auditorium like thunder had exploded. People screamed and gasped as two huge winged creatures landed on either side of me. The ground rumbled. I heard Priya yell my name, then there was only black smoke and the smell of electricity. Nausea rolled through me.

I heard blades sing, chains rattle, and metal clang.

I shrieked and threw my hands out, extending my fabrics. They coiled around my arms and expanded to ensnare the two huge winged beasts flanking me. I pulled hard and flicked my hands so the fabrics coiled around the beasts' throats.

"Now Lincoln, is that any way to treat your guardian angel?" Elijah crooned as the smoke began to clear and he unfurled his wings. They expanded, with gray and black feathers opening in a halo around him.

"Elijah, what the fuck?" I pulled my silks back to look at him before swiveling to the other person beside me, a woman with a shaved head and light brown skin. She wore similar attire to Elijah: black slacks, a short-sleeve black button-down, and black loafers.

Was this some sort of angel of death uniform? I had never seen his wings before, but I wasn't surprised that he had finally revealed his angel of death identity. I wondered why he had concealed it in the first place. Why couldn't he have told me earlier?

And are all angels of death as much of an asshole as he is?

"Hate to crash the party, but things are escalating quickly. This deathwalker has been called by the queen herself." Elijah produced a scroll from his hand in a shimmering trick of the light.

Amira snatched it and unfurled it, scanning the contents with a scowl. "There's something not right about this," she said, holding it in her palms.

Priya stared at Elijah intently, like she was trying to remember something but couldn't quite place it.

"Lincoln," she whispered. Her chains came to life and she reached for Elijah. "YOU!"

He flicked his hand to bat them away. In a flash he was behind her, his hand around her throat. He snapped one of the chains and whispered something to them. They crumbled into nothing more than dust.

Priya clawed at his hand and I lunged for the pair of them.

*What is going on?*

"Tsk, tsk," Elijah reached his hand up and splayed out his palm. The whole arena froze and the woman he had come with was behind me, her arm around my shoulders and the other braced against my stomach.

"Let her go, Elijah!" I screamed. Priya struggled and grabbed at her own throat, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"It's time, my little protégé," he said, his eyes glowing a deep blue.

“Time? Who are you? I thought you were supposed to help me! Why didn’t you tell me you were an angel of death in the first place?!” I struggled against the woman behind me. “Goddamn it! Why don’t I know anything?!” I swore, huffing and puffing as I tried to call my fabrics to me.

“You’re magic won’t work, we’re emitting a dampener. All of the magic you have is weakened. Your fighting, your weaponry, your healing...,” she whispered in my ear.

“It’s time for you to claim the throne...,” Elijah said, releasing Priya in a heap. He walked up to me and grabbed my chin. “With me. Or else she dies. Choose Lincoln, you have five seconds to decide.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Five....”

“Lincoln don’t do it, let him kill me,” Priya gasped out on the ground as she tried to crawl to me. Everyone else was still frozen around us, their eyes wide and frightened.

Emir had fire in his and the counsel was full of shock and surprise.

“Four....”

“Elijah, what happened to the queen?” I asked as his grip on my chin tightened.

“Three....”

“Goddamn it answer any of my questions!”

He released my chin and flashed over to Priya with a sickening grin as he raised a dagger.

“Two....”

“If she dies she will come to the afterworld right?”

“She will be imprisoned for all of eternity. Most likely she will turn into a demon and never know rest,” Elijah smiled maliciously.

“One....”

“*Fine!*” I screamed. I clawed at the arm around me and she finally released me to the ground.

I looked at Priya.

“I can’t let your afterlife be like that,” I murmured.

Priya pleaded with her eyes. “It’s him, Lincoln. He’s the one who murdered my team! Amaya and the others. He looks different but he feels the same, I know it. I would know this power anywhere.”

Finally I understood, and my brain felt sluggish as things started to fit together.

“She’s right. And soon I’ll come back to end the rest of you. But first, we must balance the power and take what I’ve been waiting twenty-five years for!”

“What does that mean?!” I hollered.

I looked at him, horrified, as he began to transform. His blonde hair turned black and his eyes went dark, his feathers shifting to the color of a starless night sky.

“Time to go,” he whispered.

Before I had time to think, the darkness of his eyes consumed me and I fell deep into the unknown.

“**W**hat is going on?” I asked groggily as I came to, blinking at the unfamiliar room.

My head swam and I felt like I had sandpaper in my mouth. I looked down and I was in more practical clothing. My silks had been taken, and I tried to find them with my mind but I couldn’t feel my magic weapon anymore. I tried to calm my breathing. Now was not the time to panic, even though anxiety threatened to choke me and swallow me whole.

The last hour of details slammed into me and threatened to collapse my resolve, but I held on. Elijah was nowhere to be seen and the woman he had arrived with lounged across an armchair adjacent from the bed I lay in.

“Good, you’re awake. Let’s go.” She hauled me up to my feet.

I winced as her grip bit into my arm and she led me through the only door in the room to a dark hallway that looked like a deserted hotel. She marched me through the passages, her wings tucked in close, until we arrived in front of a door that looked fairly modern. She waved her hand and the door disappeared as she shoved me inside. Elijah stood against a huge black desk with a drink in his hand, like he didn’t have a single care in the world.

“Who are you, *actually*?” I snarled.

“Sit, Lincoln,” he said, waving his hand and suddenly I was forced into a chair that had materialized from his gesture. I tried to wiggle free but it was hopeless. I aimed to scowl at him instead. He looked gleeful and smiled wolfishly.



*Oh, Jesus Christ.*

“Let me tell you a story....”

“Is this genuinely how you’re going to reveal your evil plan? Like a cliché cartoon villain?” I sneered.

“Hush, there’s a reason it’s used over and over again, isn’t there?” He chuckled as if the whole thing amused him greatly.

“Sure, reveal your evil plan,” I bit out. With a flourish of his hands, like he was waving a spell, he began to tell me his story.

“At the beginning of time there was the mortal realm and the afterworld. The afterworld was created in the image of the mother of death. The queen herself. She is an immortal. She does not need to create another to rule, because she is bound to death itself. Therefore, she has no need for a king because she is supreme. She was always meant to rule because her power keeps the souls at permanent peace and the demons damned to their cages for all eternity.”

“I know all of this. Care to share something helpful?” I snapped at him.

His gaze turned feral. “It’s rude to interrupt.”

I said nothing and waited for him to continue.

“The queen realized quickly that providing a realm for all the dead would require assistance. So she created beings from herself. She created many servants of death for many different purposes in the afterworld. The most important beings were her own personal guards, the angels of death.” He fluttered his wings as if to emphasize his power.

“They were given immense power from her own magical reserve including wings. The wings are meant to symbolize the ability to soar through life and death as emissaries. The afterworld cannot exist without the queen in the realm, it would collapse. Which is why gatekeepers must come here. The realm would implode without her power. It would decimate the mortal realm.”

“All common knowledge, Elijah. Where is the interesting part of your monologue?” I drawled out.

“Interrupt me one more time, Lincoln, and I will have your tongue cut out,” he seethed.

I didn’t know if he would actually follow through on that promise, but I did not want to find out so I simply nodded. He continued on.

“She made angels in her vision. Immortal, powerful, lethal to those who opposed the queen. Then, she created a lesser extension of them. Deathwalkers. She realized that gatekeepers, who were more mortal than death, would not be able to move freely between the realms. And she could not send her angels out into the mortal realm, so created the deathwalkers as liaisons in the image of her angels. Not as powerful, but a blend of the two worlds.”

He smiled as he perched on top of the desk and drummed his fingers lightly on the wood.

“The original deathwalker families were created from the blood of the twelve angels of death. The elite afterworld guard offered their blood, to be consumed only once, to forever remain bound to whatever family line they chose.

However, twenty-five years ago myself and another angel, Anthonia, demanded change. We were tired of serving the queen and being servants of the mortal realm. As angels, we are far more powerful than anything on Earth. Why should our job be about helping disgustingly corrupt mortals rest? We should not have to serve them. They should answer to us.” He finished off his drink then snapped his fingers and the drink refilled again.

What, exactly, were the limits of his powers here?

“The queen disagreed. She said it was not our way. Anthonia battled the queen and lost.” His voice cracked.

I looked at him aghast. This was much bigger than any of us had realized.

“You loved her?” I whispered, understanding that his hurt and hatred was clearly fueled by more than just his own selfish desires. I snapped my mouth shut, hoping that I didn’t just sacrifice my own tongue.

“We were supposed to be together for eternity! The queen took her life and made me watch. She erased her from this realm completely and I begged her for the remnants of Anthonia’s soul and power. Something for me to remember her by and hold on to. Her punishment was to simply be erased from *everything*.” His sadness erupted from him as if he could no longer contain the hurt he’d experienced. He breathed rapidly and closed his eyes, placing his fingers to his temples as if to compose himself, the cutting of my tongue completely forgotten.

“The queen took pity on me. She said my punishment was to replace Anthonia with a mortal. A way to force me to accept that we were all

working together. It was to humble me. An *educational experiment*, if you will. She demanded that I take this new human under my wing for twenty-five years and teach them what it meant to be a part of the afterworld. This human would then become an angel of death, a new addition to the guard.” He rose then, and started pacing around the room.

“She wanted to disgrace Anthonia’s power remnants by soiling it with a mortal. However, the queen grew preoccupied with the state of the afterworld. Unrest was happening because of what Anthonia and I did. We had stirred up other merchants of death, demons, and corrupt souls. We showed them that it was possible to take a stand.” He threw his glass at one of the walls and it exploded into a million fragments. I winced trying not to get hit by any of the shards.

“I used the distraction of the afterworld to my advantage. I needed to plan my revenge. I needed to place my Anthonia’s power in someone inconspicuous. Someone outside of the gatekeepers’ and deathwalkers’ society altogether. Hide it in plain sight and keep her distracted with the growing restlessness here. So I fueled it, releasing a demon here and there, convincing the queen her magic was failing, undermining her authority and whispering in the ears of her enemies.” He walked over to me then and placed his hands on the chair I was stuck in, and leaned in.

“So I had to bury Anthonia’s power deep. Keep the magic, the sight, everything locked down. Hidden and protected. Distract the queen and hide my own project under the guise of her *educational experiment*.” His breath was hot on my face and I wanted to turn and look away, but I made myself stare into his depthless eyes.

“But sometimes it was too powerful. Sometimes it flashed out and attracted parts of the afterworld that I had tried so hard to keep away. I needed you to never be a beacon until I was ready to take the necessary steps here in the afterworld.” He backed up then and returned to his place on the desk, seemingly unbothered by the glass shards he crunched through.

“Why would you want to keep it hidden? What could you possibly have gained from secrecy?” I blurted out as my mind tried to wrap around this complex story of what had been happening since the day I was born. I had been chosen at random as an unlikely and unknowing pawn to Elijah’s asinine game.

“I was able to bide my time. My plan needed meticulous planning in order to create the right opportunity to get rid of the queen. You can’t simply overthrow an eternal monarchy on a whim. But I hit a small snag. An exceptionally gifted oracle was born in the gatekeeper line and had a prophecy about my plans. She asked for an audience with the queen herself, and had already disclosed her discovery to her husband, so I killed them. But their pesky children continued to meddle in the affairs of the afterworld.” He sighed loudly, rolling his eyes.

I had read about oracles and heard about them in my gatekeeper lessons, but I didn’t know of any, personally. And if this was the same demon from years ago....

“Priya’s mom,” I whispered, suddenly realizing the string that seemed to hold all of these tragedies together.

“Yes. Then I checked back every few years on Priya herself to see if the oracle gift had passed on to her. She seemed unaffected until she tried to engage with me once and I had to kill her companions. Too bad her damn magical chains acted on their own accord. I didn’t come with a dampener that time because I didn’t think I would need it. My own mistake that I would not be making again. She should have been dead but I wanted her to suffer for trying to go against me. I never anticipated that you, my little reincarnated angel of death, would find the woman who was so hell-bent on destroying me without really understanding what lies ahead.”

“But what about the deathwalkers? What about what happened ten years ago?” I swallowed, trying to get the full picture of what, exactly, Elijah wanted.

“The queen finally got privy to my antics ten years ago and tried to disperse me. But I’ve been preparing for this for fifteen years, that stupid old bitch! She called her deathwalkers from the mortal realm for reinforcements and gatekeepers to help solidify her defenses, but all she did was solidify their demise. I turned the destruction against her with the help of powerful demons and destroyed the deathwalker connection that originated from the angels of death. No more deathwalkers to act as liaisons. I continued to isolate her away from her allies. The gatekeepers were already prohibited from crossing into the afterworld without a protective invite. I simply needed to wait until you were twenty-five so that the binding magic of my contract with the queen would not interfere.”

I didn't want to ask but I needed to know.

"Interfere with what? Where is the queen? Where are the other angels of death and the original deathwalkers and gatekeepers who fell victim to you all those years ago?"

Suddenly I felt terrified of his answer.

"You will claim the queen's magic and I will rule. The afterworld must have a matriarch and Anthonia was to fulfill that role. It was her dying wish. So you will hold the placeholder for the queen's magic and I will control you through your precious mortal, Priya. She has played such an interesting and important part in this plan. When your other mortal heartmate broke off your engagement, I was worried that you wouldn't find another in enough time so that I could manipulate them. But here the fates decided to have a little laugh and give me the one person who had always been trying to destroy me in the first place." He laughed loudly then, like this part of his plan was particularly amusing.

"Now I have my perfect leverage. The queen has had her power siphoned off for the past decade to be transferred to another with the help of some ancient evil demon magic but, unfortunately, it takes a very long time. You see, the worlds lined up the perfect timing for me. I needed time to siphon her magic, to enact my plan, to push unrest, and to have you come of age and allow the contract of the queen to expire." His wicked smile threatened to split his face in half.

"The queen damns demons without realizing their potential. Volatile and dangerous, yes, but not useless. They can be manipulated and used for power, and it was my pleasure to use it against her.

"And with the power of the queen, under my control through you, I can finally succeed. We will have an official joining heart ceremony. It will allow me to take control of you and the realm. Other angels of death have already pledged their allegiance to me. And those who don't will have the same fate as Anthonia."

I gasped then, the full reality of the situation slamming into my chest.

"As for the other deathwalkers and gatekeepers, they are in the dungeon with the precious queen, slowly rotting away and suffering for eternity. Gatekeepers have always been a cheap knock-off of the real power held in the afterworld. They will be the first to go."

My mouth fell wide open. I didn't know what to think. My head spun and I had no idea what to say or do. Elijah was so convinced and

inundated with grief, anger, and thirst for power that I had zero ideas of how I would stop him. I didn't know anything about the inner workings of the afterworld except for the few things I'd read in books.

Could I really let him control me by threatening Priya's life? Would I sacrifice the whole world for my love? I wasn't ready to answer that question.

Elijah looked at me with triumph in his eyes.

"We will be joined, similar to husband and wife in your realm. Then you will join with the queen's power, as her life force collides with yours and Anthonia's. It will most likely be excruciating, but you will survive it or your love will be taken." He stated matter-of-factly.

"If you destroy the mortal realm then there won't be much to control," I said, my whole body trembling with fear.

"Oh, darling. I want revenge. I want the queen stripped of her power and I want her to watch me burn down everything she loves, just like she did to me. She created this and I want to watch as everything she ever manifested is thrown into the hellfire by her beloved angels, the very beings that came from her own heart," he said maliciously.

"There isn't anyone to oppose me now. I bided my time for so long and pleaded with the queen for forgiveness all those years ago, and now it's my time to show her what a grave mistake she made. You, Lincoln, will help me do it. You will be the mother of death for all eternity and I will be the ruler."

"How do you know that I will cooperate? That I won't sacrifice Priya's life?" I said, struggling to get the words out of my mouth.

"Because I know your mortal heart. I know you, Lincoln. I've known you your whole life, and you are loyal to a fault. You will not forsake her and if you do, I will simply work my way down the list of everyone you've ever cared about. Do not test me. I have been waiting years for this, and you have only begun to understand. One day you will see it my way. You will understand that the human realm should be our servants, not the other way around. The afterworld holds magic and powers beyond anything seen in the mortal realm. We are eternal rulers and they are but specs of dust in the never-ending loop of time."

I was stunned into silence.

The longer I sat there, though, the more I could feel the whispers of my power coming back to me. I could feel the buildup happening but I didn't

know what it meant, a tsunami of power that would be mine to control. The afterworld seemed to give Elijah more power. Maybe it would be the same for me since we were both beings of this world. If I could only control it, I might be able to stop Elijah and rescue the queen. She would know what to do.

She would save us, right?

I had a loose plan forming in my mind.

“I need...I need some time to think,” I said, suddenly bone weary. I needed to stall.

Elijah looked at me and smirked.

“There is no stopping the inevitable. You will start to see it my way. But go think and rest. Tomorrow I will take you to start draining the queen.” He snapped his fingers, and the same bed I had awoken in earlier surrounded me.

I mumbled something about food before sleep overtook me once again and I dreamed of a world where things didn't involve death, deranged angels, and corrupted worlds.

I was forced from bed by the same woman. Apparently she was my babysitter.

“What’s your name again?” I asked as she shoved me through the dingy hallways. The walls crumbled around us like the building had been falling apart and deteriorating for a long time. Everywhere I looked there seemed to be paint peeling, wood breaking, and plaster sloughing off. It felt like the queen wouldn’t last much longer if the state of her home was an indicator of how much power she had left.

It didn’t look like this place could even exist for much longer. As we descended down a rickety set of wooden stairs, the air seemed to grow heavier with humidity and mold.

“Selene,” she said, pulling my attention back to her as we navigated the creaky stairs into a large foyer. A huge rusted chandelier cast an eerie glow, with about half of its light bulbs functioning. Broken glass littered the floor while various wiring hung from above. All of it screamed *safety hazard* to me.

“You might want to do some reconstructing,” I mumbled to her.

She poked me with the tip of her sword and guided me towards what looked like a small room off the foyer lined with four elevators.

“Are you sure these won’t break down?” I said skeptically. That sounded like my actual worst nightmare.

“They are fine,” she snapped.

She was wearing the same black uniform she had on the other day and I casually wondered if the angels of death ever wore anything else. The



power that welled in the office with Elijah ebbed and flowed within me. Sometimes I could consciously feel the dampener that Selene wore stifling me, and other times I would find moments of freedom or reprieve. Magic seemed to be quite the fickle thing.

What, exactly, was going on in my body while I was in the afterworld? Why was this power appearing intermittently and why couldn't I use any of it?

If I could just figure out how to dispose of the damn dampener, maybe I could use the magic that was bubbling inside me. Or maybe the dampener was simply a part of Selene. I didn't know, but I would need it turned off if I was to use any of the power that lay just out of my reach.

"We are seeing the queen's cage today." She shoved me into the open elevator door. It was surprisingly well-kept compared to the other parts of the house. I tried to avoid my reflection in the all-glass walls. Exhaustion consumed my features. Purple circles appeared under my eyes and bruises littered my body. I could physically see the weight of all of this forcing my shoulders forward and down. I swallowed, trying not to let it get to me, but my healing abilities were greatly impaired by this damn dampener. They wanted me weak and pliable. It was hard not to let it all overwhelm me.

I looked at where the buttons should've been and there were none. "Yeah, definitely broken," I said, cocking an eyebrow at her. She rolled her eyes and we started to move.

Slowly, we descended out of the glassy black tunnel and into a huge dome-shaped cave. It was lit up with a disturbing yellow glow and echoed with roaring, clawing, screaming, and snarling. I looked around, my gaze settling on rows and rows of various cages, all of which seemed to be layered on top of one another. There were flashes of movements and the sounds of thunder roaring around. This is what a demon prison looks like.

Beneath the cells, a faint red glow escaped like lava oozing from a bottomless pit. We whooshed quickly down the glass tube, past the level of the prison. I craned my neck trying to get glimpses of all the creatures in cages, but I only got snippets of huge, bulbous bodies, grotesque creatures with claws, fangs, and other oddities.

We entered a black tunnel again, then seemed to drop into a deeper layer of the prison underneath the red haze. There was no light here. No sound. The silence was oppressive. I wanted to claw at my throat and find my own voice but I was frozen under Selene's nasty gaze.

We finally ended in a halt and the doors opened.

I didn't know what to expect but Elijah greeted us, looking irritable as ever.

"Why is the queen so far down here?" I asked, trying to reach for any type of magical power I could find. I came up short. *Damn it.*

"We have to keep her far away from the others. Can't have her power acting up, now can we? She needs to be isolated from her creations as we drain her magical reserve," he said in a clipped tone.

He grabbed my arm and started guiding me through the dark tunnels of the compound. I tried to keep my wits about me, remember how to get back to the elevators, but we weaved around so many times that my head spun. My brain felt like mush as I tried to process all that I had seen and been told.

I wondered how Priya was doing, if she was distressed or if she had contacted Mara. If Mara was okay. She would be worried sick. I literally left my best friend and girlfriend without so much as a "goodbye and I love you." But thinking about them right now wouldn't help me. I needed to focus on a way out of my current situation.

Elijah stopped abruptly and I stumbled forward. We stood in front of a huge metal door that was bolted shut. But Elijah walked right through it, dragging me in as I winced, preparing my body to slam into metal. Instead, it opened up into another dark room that had a glass cage where a small, frail woman was collapsed in the corner.

I gasped. My heart clenched, and bile rose in my throat. This was the queen.

She looked old and young at the same time, like her image was a mirage flickering between timelines. Her skin was bone white, her full lips were cracked and bloody, her brown eyes looked exhausted and dulled. Dark, curly hair lay limply around her face. She looked like she'd been deprived of food, sleep, and shelter for years, which she had. It made me want to kick Elijah in the balls.

I remembered that the queen appeared in whatever age gave the seer most comfort. Her magic seemed to be wanting to keep up appearances, but it waned. She looked a thousand years old right now.

"What have you done?" I whispered. The queen had been imprisoned for ten years, slowly fading away. I cursed Elijah. How could he do this to

her? I didn't even know her but I felt connected to her. Elijah deserved this torture, not her. How could he do this to the one who created him?

It made my blood boil.

"This is a remnant of her true form. Pity, as she was once a more formidable force," Elijah said lightly.

I ran over to the glass and pressed myself as close as I could to her.

I didn't know what to call her.

"My Queen?" I tried and her eyes which had fluttered closed opened slightly. Her eyes widened.

"One of my children," she said, reaching a hand to the glass.

I wanted to sob and throw myself against the cage, until it broke into a million little pieces, and save her. How would the queen be able to help save the realm when they were draining the life out of her? She could barely sit up and stay awake, let alone save both worlds. She was in a tattered white nightgown. Her nails had broken off and her body looked too thin and frail.

"You have Anthonia's power. And mine," she said, looking animated at me. So the queen knew there was something itching to be released from me, too. Was it truly hers? Again, I had so many questions.

Does Elijah know about this as well? Or maybe he knows that, either way, he has the upper hand and he can control it just as he's been controlling the queen?

Elijah watched us like he was bored.

"You won't be able to save her. Nothing she tells you will help. She is too far gone, her power is almost completely depleted and compounded to this." He held up a jeweled crown that had all the colors of the rainbow intertwined in the dark metal. It had intricate woven patterns that came to a point where a large blood-red ruby sat and pulsed at the center.

"Once her power is gone and I put this on your head, Lincoln, it will forever be joined to you. Old demonic magic helped me create this mockery. Ironical, isn't it? You will be controlled by the crown itself, which will be mine to manipulate." He smiled broadly at it. The arrogance rolled off of him in waves.

I nearly vomited from it.

The queen scowled at him, but made no moves. Her hand slipped from the glass and she exhaled shakily. I squatted down next to her and leaned up against the glass. I didn't know what to do.

“Child,” she whispered when I was nearly at eye-level.

“My power is almost gone, the boundaries that hold the worlds apart will break in three days’ time. Call the gatekeepers, there is only one week’s time before I am completely finished. Get them here to fight the angels. There is an oracle out there who will know where the fail-safe is. Find her. She will help save us as will you. I have done all that I can do,” she muttered hurriedly.

I looked at her, then over to where Elijah was clearly gloating over his contraption with Selene.

I nodded, stood up, and walked away.

How does one get an invitation or message out from the afterworld? I had three days to figure it out. And I’d be damned if I didn’t give it my best fucking shot.

“Do you angels of death not eat?” I asked Elijah as I was seated across from him at a large gray wooden table. The dining room itself looked much like the rest of the house: broken, crumbling, and just plain sad. The table was long; it could’ve easily sat twenty people, yet we were on opposite ends. Elijah didn’t have any food in front of him, he just sat staring at me like he was examining something underneath a microscope. I had what looked like chicken noodle soup in front of me, which I found almost amusing. Was this supposed to bring me comfort?

“We do not need to eat, no,” he said, looking slightly amused. His large wings were open and took up about four feet on either side of him.

“So in a week, I will be queen and you will be my keeper?” I brought a spoonful of the soup to my mouth. Surprisingly, it tasted really great. That made me even more suspicious.

“If that’s how you want to see it, sure. But we will also be eternally joined in a binding ceremony, much like a wedding in the mortal realm except more...permanent.” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. The way he said it made it feel intimate. Physically and emotionally tied together for eternity. Instead of crawling out of my skin like I wanted to, I took another spoonful of soup.

I didn’t want to know what, in the actual fuck, it would mean to be joined to this man.

“Right. I want to talk to Priya, and I want a guarantee of her safety, otherwise I won’t cooperate.” I squared my shoulders.

I needed to get that message to the gatekeepers. And, selfishly, I wanted to see Priya. To touch her. To have her tell me this is all a bad dream and that I would wake up in bed with her and laugh about how real it had all felt.

“What could you possibly do that I couldn’t defend against?” Elijah laughed darkly.

I didn’t have much to bargain with.

“Information about the next great oracle,” I said, lying through my teeth. I needed to contact Priya, and I had a feeling this would get his attention, especially if the queen had brought it up. I was taking a huge leap of faith but I knew this was all I could bluff my way through.

“I killed the last great oracle. I would know if there was another,” Elijah said, squinting his eyes.

“You did. But the gatekeepers took their next one underground because they feared for her life, similarly to how they feared for me. They weren’t taking any chances with their oracle after you slaughtered the last one, you bastard,” I said with an extra bite. It, at least, made me feel better being bitchy to him.

“How do I know you aren’t lying?” Elijah asked, but I could tell he was taking the bait. Clearly the oracles are powerful if he’d gone on a personal mission to kill Priya’s mom. For years afterward, he made sure that Priya would not inherit the same power. This told me that there’s a way to stop him and he doesn’t want others finding out. I just needed to find out exactly what that was and how I could make it happen.

“Why would I lie? You said yourself there isn’t anything out there that can stop you, and I just want to see my girlfriend and make sure she isn’t suffering in the demon prison of hell. I don’t feel like it’s that much to ask. Let me see and talk to her for ten minutes, and I’ll tell you who the other oracle is,” I said, trying to keep my voice nice and even.

He sighed dramatically and thrummed his fingers on the wooden table, but I already knew he would agree.

“Fine.”

“Today?” I asked.

“Tomorrow,” he countered. “Today I’ll show you what will become of your gatekeepers and the old deathwalkers, in order to remind you to play your role dutifully.” He pushed away from the table. “Finish your meal and we’ll go.”

I stood up abruptly, already not wanting to add any delay. “I’m finished, let’s go.”

“To the dungeons.” He walked away, not bothering to wait for me.

“Okay sure, yeah, I’ll follow,” I grumbled and then shivered. I didn’t know what to expect but I knew it wouldn’t be good.



WE HAD GONE BACK to the elevators and went through the scary-looking glass tube again. We arrived at a place that I thought was the queen’s chamber. My brain couldn’t figure out the afterworld’s tunnel system. Realistically, I would never be able to get back to the queen without Elijah guiding me or a really good map.

*Fuck.*

But this time, when we entered the metal door simply by walking through it, we stepped into a field. It was dead, dark, and barren, like a desert void of all color except ghosts and apparition-looking forms. It was lifeless and expansive. A never-ending field of sorrow.

“The Gatekeepers Grove,” Elijah said snarkily.

The color drained from my face as I took in the sight before me: hundreds of gatekeepers in ghost-like form walking in circles with lost expressions. They bumped into one another, not seeming to recognize anything, anyone, or themselves. Some screamed, cried, and raged about. It was like watching a whole bunch of adults have a breakdown all at once, with no help in sight.

“Why...why are they like this? Why didn’t you let them rest?” My knees felt weak. He was truly a despicable creature. The pain on their faces was palpable. It was like watching a horror film in real time.

“They were the queen’s beloved ones and I wanted to make them suffer so she would suffer,” he replied, shrugging like the answer should have been obvious. His hatred of the queen oozed out of him in waves. The fact that he was intentionally trying to drive the gatekeepers to madness and demonhood, simply to spite the queen, was despicable. His desire for revenge had no bounds.

I spotted one ghost who simply sat in the dirt. Her white hair floated around her in thick waves and she looked serene. The only one who

seemed to find stillness. Everyone else was ridden with emotions that were so painful it was hard to look at them for too long.

“Can I talk to them?” I said, hating that I had to get permission but I didn’t want to jeopardize my chance of talking to Priya.

“Sure. They won’t understand what’s going on, but do as you wish. Let this serve as a reminder of what will come to Priya if you do not behave.” He smiled wickedly.

“What about that one?” I said pointing to the woman who sat.

“She was the oracle I killed. She’s sat like that since I brought her here. She hasn’t moved or made a sound since the day I killed her. Her eyes haven’t even opened once. You’d have more luck getting a boulder to move.”

“Priya’s mom,” I whispered, my gaze going wide. Tears welled in my eyes and I made my way to where she was sitting. “Sneha?” I sat down directly in front of her and crossed my legs.

She made no move to show that she had heard me.

I reached out and placed a hand on hers. I was expecting to feel smoke through my fingers, but I connected with warm flesh. I stared in wonder at my hand touching hers, and looked over to see Elijah was still tormenting the other souls. How she had remained corporeal here for years was nearly impossible to comprehend.

“Do not make any noise or indication that you can feel me, Lincoln dear,” Sneha said, her lips barely moving. I nearly fell over. The screams and cries of the others echoed around me as I strained to hear her words.

The queen had been right about talking to the oracle.

I tried to act like I was distracted by all the other beings and like I was actively ignoring Elijah as he snickered and tormented the ghosts.

“You don’t have to speak, but simply listen.” Warmth oozed from her whispers. I wanted to ask her a million questions and hug her and tell her I was doing my best. But what she had to say was much more important than my need to comfort her or myself.

“First off, thank you for loving my daughter. I miss her dearly and I know she has suffered greatly because of this angel of death and my own murder. But you need to listen closely, Lincoln. You need to incapacitate the guard that travels with Elijah to stop the dampener I’m sure they used on you. You have ancient power within you begging to be released. The queen used her own fail-safe when she cast out Anthonia’s power. She



included a seed of her own, pure and whole, to bloom as soon as it made it into the afterworld. That is the power I am sure you've recognized begging to be released."

I touched my hand to my chest realizing the waves of energy that had been coursing through me in my time in the afterworld was the queen's power aching to come home. It had been growing since my time here, but it was never accessible to me. I'd been trying to find a thread of connection to it like Priya taught me to do with my silks, but it always slipped through my fingers.

"Additionally, don't eat anything from here, as I am sure it contains a dampener as well. Instead, find the kitchen yourself and ask for the *queen's meal*. They will know that means without magic. You must contact the gatekeepers and call them here. When the queen's magical border disintegrates in three days' time, the gatekeepers can cross and will be able to be in the afterworld without harm until the magic is restored. The demons will be disoriented only for a short amount of time. Your window to succeed will be small, before all hell truly breaks loose."

I swallowed and gave a small nod as her eyes fluttered open for a split second and I saw Priya's eyes. It nearly broke me, but the golden eyes I saw were gone before I could think about it too much.

"You must break the red ruby stone in the makeshift crown in order to release the power back to the queen. You will need the help of the gatekeepers to keep Elijah at bay long enough to break the stone, then the queen will do the rest."

I glanced over to where Elijah was flying straight at the ghosts and swerving to avoid them at the last minute. It sent them screaming and cowering to the ground. I clenched my fists and focused back on Sneha.

"I was only hanging on to deliver this message to you. Once I am done speaking to you, I will surrender my soul and be returned to my place of rest as the oracle, leaving my fellow brothers and sisters." A single tear slipped down her cheek and she made no move to wipe it away.

"The power will go to Priya almost immediately. I've only been able to hold on this long because I bound myself to these final words. I have been sitting and waiting for you for so long, my dear. I am tired and I'm ready to be released from this hell. The others cannot manage the final surrender because they do not contain the power of the oracle. I am hopeful that you

will be able to send them to rest with the queen's help, once you succeed. Tell my children I love them and I am so proud of them."

She had a lot of faith in me considering I had very little in myself.

"Thank you for giving my daughter the gift of love, Lincoln. I foresee a future bright with happiness and joy for you two. As well as with my son and Grey. Do your best, dear. I know you will free the queen."

"Because you can see the future?" I whispered.

"No, because I believe in you." She gave a small smile. "Now, the words I am ready to speak: *Death, I welcome you.*"

The feeling of her started to slip through my fingers and in the blink of an eye, she was gone. Tears ran down my cheeks. I swiped at them and stood up abruptly, wanting to get away from where she'd been sitting so Elijah wouldn't notice.

"Show me the deathwalkers," I said, walking to where Elijah was still teasing souls.

"Get tired of the suffering?" he asked, laughing darkly at my obvious sadness.

"Something like that."

"Well, I will warn you. The deathwalkers are arguably worse off," he said, grabbing my arm and dragging me off to the metal door.

I had my answer but I didn't like it, and I didn't like that my bluff to Elijah came true. Priya was the new oracle, and that was not something I was going to divulge to him anytime soon. But it did mean that Priya's life was in serious danger, starting right now.

Elijah was right.

The deathwalkers looked much worse. They weren't ghosts. Most of them were wraiths well on their way to becoming demons. I thought the gatekeepers were tortured, but it was nothing compared to what I saw here. It broke my heart. And the tears fell almost immediately. I didn't wipe them away. My emotions are not a weakness. They make me strong, grounded, and dedicated to what I need to do.

This time, when we passed through another metal door, we walked into what felt like the equivalent of a human zoo. It was repulsive. They were cages upon cages that held all the deathwalkers. Their auras were all wrong, dark and heavy. Some were fading into demonhood right before my eyes. Their time was already up.

"I wanted to show the queen that if she would shun her original deathwalkers, the angels of death, I would make the cheap knockoffs pay for it dearly. A decade is a long time to be tortured and held back from rest. They're starting to lose faith, and that is tainting their souls. They will soon be beyond saving," Elijah said casually.

I walked around the cages. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of deathwalkers and I made myself look at as many faces as I could. I promised I would help free them to their place of rest. They all would've found peace if they'd died the normal way. Now, they're being forced into something despicable in order to survive Elijah's eternal purgatory. I wanted to scream.

This was all so wrong.

Some slammed their bodies against their cage walls and others crouched in the corner looking feral or scared. Some had turned to picking at their skin or eyes or hair. The madness simply running rampant through their bodies and minds.

“So, you’re accelerating their descent to demonhood?” I asked, wanting to hear him say it out loud. I wanted him to confess to his monstrous actions and see the look on his face as he did.

“Oh, yes. I have ways to fuel the fire in their souls that manifests from the dark. A decade is a long time for me to work and reinforce my own agenda. They simply needed the right push to fully connect deeper to the madness that comes from being trapped in the afterworld, without the promise of peace.” He smiled maliciously and looked positively delighted at his own work, painfully laid out in front of us.

I gave one more hard look at as many of the cages I could, then took a moment to breathe, to imprint this picture in my head forever, to let the anger and sorrow roll through me. The kernel of the power that had been blossoming in my heart seemed to quake in response. The queen’s power seemed to thrash inside me, but I had no way to release it yet. I didn’t know how to access it, so I let it build and push against my skin and my head until it nearly blinded me and caused me to double over.

I wanted it to rise, to grow. I needed it to. I turned away from the cages after and the power hummed underneath my skin.

I had seen enough.

Elijah and I exited slowly and he babbled on about how, if you were careful, you could stall demonhood for years and that he had lost a few deathwalkers early on to experiments that worked a little too well. He prattled on and I focused on my breathing. I could do nothing to help those who’d already succumbed to his disgusting ways.

Mentally, I was tallying my to-do list. I had three days to prepare for the borders to break down between the realms. I needed to:

Take care of this dampener in Selene.

Don’t eat the food.

Get a message to Priya.

Destroy the blood crystal to free the queen.

Awaken her power and mine.

As far as to-do lists go, it wasn’t the longest one I’d ever had. But it was definitely the fucking hardest.

“Can I see the kitchen?” I asked, switching subjects. The inhumane sounds of the deathwalkers seemed to slowly fade away as we made our way out.

“The kitchen?” Elijah repeated, lifting one eyebrow.

“Yeah. Unlike you, I need to eat more regularly and I’m a snacker, as you know, so I would like to see where I can grab something if I want. Plus, I barely ate earlier because I was so anxious to see what you had to show me,” I said, trying to choose my words carefully.

“Of course, this is your home after all,” he said, fluttering his hand and leading the way. The word *home* made me shudder and I gritted my teeth. His version of the afterworld would never be a home to me.

I briefly wondered: if I could save these souls, maybe I could save Elijah’s too.

Before I could think on it further, Elijah threw me against the wall with his forearm across my chest, pushing the air from my lungs. My head cracked against the stone and I nearly bit my tongue off. Pain radiated down my spine and I just knew that my deathwalker healing abilities would have a field day with this wound.

*Goddamn bastard.*

“But try anything funny, Lincoln, and I will show you *exactly* how good at hurting others I have become in the last several years.”

I snarled as he released me and I slid down the wall, wheezing and spitting out blood. Elijah’s beyond saving. There isn’t anything left in him to save and, oddly, that brought me a weird sense of comfort.

We made our way to the kitchen and I was surprised that there were about ten staff members. They looked like humans of all shapes, sizes, and colors. I wondered why there were so many people staffed here if the angels of death didn’t need to eat. The staff are, in no way, affiliated with the angels. I wondered if they were truly loyal to the queen.

Elijah introduced me to Maurice, the head of the staff, then left, saying that tomorrow he would take me to Priya. Shortly after, Selene materialized in his place.

“I can make you any mortal concoction you want,” Maurice said briskly. He was a short man with a shiny bald head and light brown skin. His eyes glowed like the sun and he had a thick handlebar mustache.

“Great,” I said.

I needed Selene to be occupied for a moment, though, so I could tell him I needed the meals without magic. I walked around the kitchen, which looked like the inside of some of the fancy cooking shows I would watch with Mara. My heart nearly broke in two whenever I thought of her, but I had to stay focused. Things would be much worse if I didn't figure this out. I needed to make a big enough disruption to occupy Selene.

"Why are there so many of you if the angels of death don't need to eat?" I asked, trailing around the room, touching things, and stalling. Maurice seemed to be irritated that I was in his space, but the rest of the staff parted for me like I was Moses in the Red Sea. Selene looked bored and irritated. Typical.

"Some of them enjoy food. Some other beings need some type of nourishment. Plus there is simply no other place for us to go. We're connected to the house and the queen's power. We are beings of the afterworld, created with the intention of doing this job. This is all we know."

So the queen's beings were created and tied to her magic, but also separate entities of their own free will? Magic was a weird thing that I didn't fully understand, but I would have plenty of time to ask the queen questions after I released her.

I spotted some oddly colored glowing liquid in a bowl, and I slowly made my way over to it.

"What is this?" I peered into the basin. It swirled with colors of a night sky and a deep red, almost like blood. Maurice's face paled and Selene stiffened. I wondered if this was the dampener.

"Didn't you come here to request a snack or something?" Selene asked, shifting so she stood a few inches taller than she had before.

"Right," I said, turning away from the bowl. I could feel both of them relax.

*Strange.*

Now I had a distraction.

"Hmmm," I made a big show of contemplating what I wanted to eat and furrowing my brows. I snapped my fingers, which seemed to scare both of them slightly, and proclaimed, "I'll take some drunken noodles, please. With shrimp. And make it, like, a medium spice, okay?" I flashed a wide smile at Maurice, who simply nodded his head.

"Right away."

“Thank you! I’m so excited!” I flung out my hands and spun around, purposefully catching the edge of the weird liquid, and sent it tumbling to the ground where it hissed and fizzled.

Jesus, I really hoped that wasn’t the dampener because it sounded like it would rip a hole through my insides.

The whole staff gasped and Selene cursed.

“Oops,” I said, dragging Maurice’s shocked expression away from the liquid’s mess as Selene rushed forward and snarled, saying she would fix this and that I was a stupid, clumsy mortal.

“I need it to be a part of the *queen’s meal*. Do you understand?” I whispered, watching Selene murmur and wave her hands over the spill as if trying to magically neutralize it.

“I need all my meals to be like that, understood?” I repeated earnestly.

Maurice’s eyes widened in surprise, then went steely. “Anything for the true queen’s guest,” he said, bowing.

Now, to take care of Selene and the dampener.

I sighed. That was a problem for tomorrow night. And tomorrow night is when I would see Priya again for the first time. I desperately needed to prepare her for what was to come. I wasn’t sure how I would warn her without Elijah finding out, but it was a work in progress.

I would do my absolute best to honor Priya’s mom and the queen.

I never wanted to be a hero but here I was, doing the damn job anyway.

**T**oday was the day. I was going to see Priya again. I didn't know how to tell her what I'd found out. It seemed impossible to get any message across without putting her life in danger. Elijah agreed to take me to the mortal realm and I was given ten measly minutes.

In less than a year, my whole life had been turned upside down. None of this was conceivable months ago. I barely thought of the life I had before this, the one where Isaac and I got married and lived very normal lives. My life seemed to have been roaring towards this point of contention and there was no way I could get out of it now. I wasn't one to back down from a challenge, especially when my loved ones were on the line.

What I really needed was to focus on the task at hand and take it one step at a time. I needed a way to get a note to Priya, except there wasn't anything in this damn palace I could use. How could I ask for some pen and paper without it seeming suspicious as hell? Not to mention, how would I slip it to her without anyone noticing in our parent-supervised meeting?

I groaned in frustration. This task seemed nearly impossible with Elijah breathing down our necks.

The day after tomorrow is when the boundaries would break. The gatekeepers needed to be ready, and so did I. They probably had a way to incapacitate Selene so the powers swirling within me could finally be released. I tried not to think too much about what would happen when this power buildup erupted. It made anxiety constrict in my throat because...



what if it isn't enough? What if there's no way for us to defeat Elijah and his carefully laid out, twenty-five-year plan?

I had Anthonia's power and some of the queen's. Sneha and the queen had confirmed it themselves. It gave me chills to think that I had Elijah's long-lost lover's power inside me. I didn't know if I would be ready when all this power was free. I still felt like an infant in this world of magic.

Would it be enough to stop Elijah and help the queen? To destroy the blood ruby in the crown? I had no way of knowing. I still couldn't feel the trickle of magic I felt with my fabrics. I was just getting used to having my own magically powered weapon, then it was stripped away from me.

Suddenly I had an idea.

"Hey." I poked my head out of my door to see Selene lounging against the wall, with her legs stretched out.

"What?" she snapped.

"I'm seeing the love of my life today and I want to give my fabrics back to her. They were a gift and I want her to have them since I'll be here for, like, eternity. You know?" I said, trying to sound casual.

She looked at me skeptically.

"You literally have a dampener on, so I can't make them do anything anyways. Also, her favorite color is white, so maybe you could change them back to that color instead of their normal black? I also have a special way of folding them, so once you get them, just bring them in with my lunch. Can I also have some beets today? I am feeling a little backed up, you know? Thanks!" I slammed the door, hoping I didn't sound as nervous as I felt, and listened to her response.

Selene cursed then grumbled. I heard her get up and move around before she shuffled away. The lock slid into place, and I prayed she would think I was just being annoying because I was a lovesick, constipated puppy, not because I actually had a plan.

Ten minutes later, there was an aggressive thumping on my door. "Your fabric and your lunch. Elijah says he will be here in a few hours to take you to the mortal realm."

I smiled against the door and opened it to see my fabric in a crumpled mess next to a tray of beets, mashed potatoes, and beef. I quickly gathered it all up, shoved the door, sat in front of it, and quickly got to work. I laid out the fabric and sat in the middle of it, bringing my lunch tray with me.

I started to squish and crush the soft-boiled beets in my hands until my fingers were stained pink and there was enough juice in the little bowl to work with. I tried to figure out the most concise way to send this message.

*Cum 2mw*

I winced at the bad sexual innuendo, but my beet juice stash was limited and I needed the least amount of words and letters as possible to convey my message. Then, I drew a crown, an equal sign, and a skull and crossbones. That made it seem like she was in danger at least.

Okay, how do I say that I need a weapon to defeat a dampener?

*Need.*

Badly drawn sword. God, this is a lost cause.

*4 dampnr.*

I looked at the writing and the pictures and winced. It looked like a child wrote it, or worse: a gross, horny teenaged boy. But that was the best I could do. I barely had enough beet juice to finish the last word. I sighed and went to wash my hands, the pink still lingering underneath my fingernails. I scrubbed them until they were raw, and dumped the beet pulps in the toilet and flushed.

I went back and took some bites of the food, hoping that Maurice was following my instructions. I waited until the stain dried, then I folded it up as best as I could so it hid the stain completely. Sighing, I waited for Elijah. I hoped that would be enough information for her to get the message and to come in with reinforcements. Tomorrow, all hell would break loose. *Literally*. I would need all the help I could get to free the queen and save the realms from one another.

I lay down on my bed with no intention of falling asleep, but I drifted off anyway, thinking of how tomorrow could actually be the end of the world as I know it.



POUNDING on the door woke me up and I groggily realized that I was clutched around the white bundle of fabric.

“Lincoln, it’s time. I’m coming in.” Elijah stepped in and looked at me funny with the fabric in my hands.

“It’s sentimental. Priya gave this to me and I want her to have it back,” I said, sticking my chin out.

“Right. You mortals and your love charms. Well, they’ve been stripped of magic so they won’t do you much good now,” he said with a snicker. “Let’s go.” He held out his hand and I reached for it tentatively.

A sudden vortex swooshed around me, and my whole body was stretched like Laffy Taffy. I was pulled apart and put back together again, then plopped in the mortal realm. I could feel myself slam into my body in the bed that held my beacon. I gasped and sat up. Mara nearly fell out of her chair and looked at me with tears in her eyes. She glanced quickly at Elijah, who was looming over her.

“You son of a bitch!” she screamed. Her hair flew around her and she lunged at him, fingernails at the ready. He simply side-stepped her as she snarled. My heart broke in two. I wasn’t expecting Mara to be here. They’d been taking care of her and including her in what was going on.

“Mara, please. I don’t have much time. I love you so much, but I have to talk to Priya, like, now.” I ran to her, wrapping my arms around her.

“I know. Are you safe?” she whispered. I looked directly at Elijah and he gave me a warning look.

“I’m safe right now.” It wasn’t a lie or truth, really. Something in between.

Mara pulled away and looked into my eyes. I begged her to see the truth, that I was fighting for my own life and hers and the entire fucking realms. I wanted to live in this moment with my best friend, but I didn’t have time. None of us did.

“I’ll get Priya,” Mara said, nodding and understanding. She gave Elijah a blood-curdling glare and left the room.

“Ten minutes is all you get, make it last. I will be here but not visible, so behave.” Elijah said. “If you so much as speak of anything, I will kill everyone here, starting with your precious Mara. Do you understand?”

I nodded dumbly and kept my eyes trained on the door.

I felt Elijah leave. Priya bursted in twenty seconds later, looking wild and frazzled. Her eyes widened, silent tears slipping down her face as a sob broke out. We ran toward one another, colliding in a tangle of arms, and her lips were on mine. Our tears mingled together. The kiss felt like coming home, like everything was normal and right for one split second before I painfully broke away.

“Are you okay, love? I’ve been so worried. Where is he?” Priya said, looking around scowling. She had that I’m-going-to-kill-a-demon look going on. Her and Mara are always so fierce.

“Priya, look at me. He is here but you can’t see him. I can’t say anything, otherwise, he’ll kill you all,” I said, pleading with my eyes. “I wanted to give this to you. I’m not allowed to have it anymore and it’s no longer charmed, so it’s just fabric now. It’s your favorite color because I know how much you love white,” I said, trying to speak with my eyes.

Priya hates white. She’s a color fiend. Rich, vibrant hues are hers. But Elijah didn’t know that weird detail, and Priya seemed to understand.

“Thank you for being so thoughtful. I’ll treasure it,” she said, taking it from me and setting it aside.

“Thank you for taking care of Mara,” I said. She squeezed me tighter and I almost fell apart at the seams.

“Can we just sit here and hold one another for the rest of the time?” I whispered.

“Six minutes,” Elijah said from nowhere and everywhere at once.

“Yes, Lincoln. Whatever you want,” Priya said, her eyes clouding with tears. So we sat like that, wrapped in one another. She stroked my hair and we swapped small kisses to make the minutes stretch to hours until Elijah reappeared.

“Time’s up.”

“When will I see you again?” Priya asked, her arms clutching tight around me.

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“She will be busy for eternity, so who knows?” Elijah smirked.

*Cocky bastard.*

Priya’s face turned into fury.

“If you hurt her, I swear to god!” Priya snarled.

“There is no god! There is only me, and you have nothing to threaten me with, little gatekeeper. You’re simply a pawn in a larger game. I will come back for you. Not for the sake of Lincoln, but rather to control her.” He smiled maliciously and we snapped back into the afterworld, where I collapsed in a heap of tears.

I felt it, the moment the barrier broke around me and the realms became exposed to one another. My skin pebbled and I woke up in a sweat. Cold air blasted around me. The queen's magic was no longer able to protect the realms from one another. Her time was almost done.

I had purposefully fallen asleep in clothes I could fight in, even though I had no idea what the fight would look like. The air around me shifted, cracking and bubbling as the two worlds became open to one another. I could feel the heavy tension in the room, thick and suffocating. There was a loud pop and the air itself seemed to shake. I flew to the door where Selene was standing, her eyes scanning the hall as if waiting for something to pop up out of nowhere. I had no concept of time, but I knew Priya would come as soon as the barrier fell. I hoped she had brought enough firepower to fight what lie ahead.

"To the throne room," Selene bit out. Silently, I followed her through the hallways. I still didn't know how to navigate the house, but Selene led me to where Elijah sat with several other angels of death. I didn't hide my disgust or my sneer at those who had betrayed the queen for Elijah's selfish quest.

He's a virus that has festered and infected so many of the queen's people.

"What happens now?" I whispered, looking at the row of angels and other sentient beings of the afterworld.

"The queen's power is almost fully in the blood ruby. This is merely a precursor of what is to come. The barrier is no longer being fueled by her

magic and is slowly breaking down until it runs out. In just a few days, her power will be completely ours to control. The siphoning will be complete,” Elijah said flippantly, like he wasn’t addressing the end of my world. “You will stay in this room with me as a precaution, considering the realm is now vulnerable to your little gatekeepers, but I would guess they won’t get very far.” He offered a smug smile.

I tried to hide my emotions as fear stabbed my chest. I hoped that whatever Elijah had planned, the gatekeepers could handle it. I balled my fist up and reigned in the need to punch something. I began pacing back and forth.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt Priya,” I said coolly, knowing anything that came out of his mouth couldn’t be trusted.

“Yes and I won’t, but the other gatekeepers will need to be taken care of at some point. My demon beast friend is an easy way to fulfill that task without much energy and attention,” he said, flopping down in what looked like his new throne.

I snapped my head around as a roar echoed and the ground rumbled.

“What was that?” I asked, trying not to seem scared. Everything around me was buzzing with energy and chaos. I didn’t know where to look or where to focus.

“That, my dear, is what I have for the gatekeepers.” The other angels chuckled.

I swallowed, praying that Priya and the others would make it to the throne room in one piece, that whatever Elijah thought he could do to them, they would come out stronger.

I ended up sitting on the floor for a long time, unable to do much of anything else. I curled myself into a ball and tried to steady my breathing. More roars, rumbles, and loud booms erupted around the room. I tried not to let my imagination run wild. It was horrible to be stuck here, unable to do anything but listen. At one point, Elijah demanded that I eat something. Time crawled by, and with each passing minute my hope plummeted further and further.

At one point, I heard what sounded like human screams. It sounded like it was just on the other side of these four walls. Other noises jarred me, like wet slapping and aggressive cracks. I pounded my fists against each of the walls and ran around trying all the doors and slamming my

body against each one. Elijah laughed and I decided that it wasn't worth battering my body for a fight I couldn't get to.

I was just starting to truly give up the idea that they would be able to find their way in, when there was a crack in the main door. It sounded like wood splintering and exploding. I whipped my head up, my hopes soaring once again.

"What in the..." Elijah snarled.

I could feel him summoning his magic, then the explosion hit. Pieces of wood flew about as a blast of hot white air erupted around everyone. My ears began to ring and it was impossible to see with smoke and bits of wooden debris swirling around.

I heard coughing and cursing.

The angels of death were strong, but they appeared worried. It seems as if they truly believed the gatekeepers would be incapable of penetrating their small throne room fortress. They started to speak hurriedly and I wondered idly if my plan had been doomed from the start. How could gatekeepers work against formidable immortal beings or damned demon beasts?

But then something swelled inside me. I looked around and saw that Selene was lying on the ground, seemingly uninjured but unconscious, and Elijah was nowhere to be seen. The whole room was filled with a foggy hue as the smoke from the explosion started to fill the space.

I blinked then screamed in agony. It was like a dam had been unlocked from within and I howled, falling to the floor as magic surged into my veins, hot and intense, scorching my insides. The dampener was no longer active.

"No," I heard a whisper and Elijah was there, his eyes wide. "Not yet!" He whispered something as his fingers moved, magic forming as he shoved a hand to my heart. It burned like a hot iron and I screamed again, but it was too late. Whatever had been unlocked was raging through my veins. It would not be contained or controlled by Elijah's magic anymore.

I shoved out my hands and I felt the force of it singe my fingertips as I blasted him away. He slammed against the far wall, sputtering and cursing, his fingertips touching the base of his skull and coming away wet with blood.

The power raged inside me. It was the power of the angels. A power that was meant to be a light was now dark and grotesque in Elijah's hands,

tainted by his and Anthonia's selfishness. It fueled something in me. It was ancient, angry, and ready to be unleashed. Too bad their own anger was now what was fueling mine. Their rage now turned against them.

The queen's own anger and magic swirled underneath my skin, glittering and moving organically. Both seemed to move together, molding to form something that was my own. It wanted to fuel my own hatred. It wanted to help me rid the world of Elijah's deviance.

I locked eyes with Elijah. "This ends...today." I held my hands out on either side of me and guided power to my fingers. It felt as natural as breathing. It sang and hummed in my palms as I shoved my energy out again and slammed him farther into the wall.

His body cracked against the wood as his wings folded around him to try and protect him from further assault. The wall gave in to an Elijah-sized dent. A look of disbelief flashed quickly across his features, but it didn't last.

Abruptly, he was on his feet and in my face, shoving his magic at me, and it was like I was being guided by a puppet string. Every blast of energy or shift of his movement, I saw and I blocked easily. Instincts that were not mine kicked in, and I fought with this new magic, as if my body and soul had this dance memorized.

It was as if the queen's magic took control and guided me through every breath. We tangoed with fists and energy, both never yielding. One moment I would be down, and the next he would be the one slammed against the ground. Our powers met each other with vigor and intensity.

Everything else seemed to fade away as we traded blow after blow. Sweat slid down my back and blood was covering random parts of my body. Bruises would soon bloom, then disappear with my healing abilities now fully fueled by the magic within me.

Elijah would snarl and lunge, whipping out with his wings and his strength. A battle raged on around us, but all I could think of was getting him down long enough to find the damn blood ruby and the queen and Priya.

I knew that I wouldn't be enough to stop him fully, only to incapacitate him. The only one who could do that was the queen herself. I needed to get to her and destroy the ruby, because she was the only one who could take her creation away. I was merely a conduit, and she was the source.



I was panting and sweating as we continued to duel. I saw the strain in Elijah as he continued to fight, and I idly wondered how the other angels were faring. It seemed like the thought dawned on him as well because there was another blinding light. A scream echoed in the chamber, creating a pause in the mania around us. Suddenly the smoke cleared and the scene in front of me was unbelievable.

Priya stood among the other gatekeeper leaders. Various golden whips, chains, and ropes were around each angel. They were all pacified to sleep or, at least, unconscious. Priya flashed Elijah a snarky smile.

"I was given the oracle sight just days ago and it showed me how to stop the angels of death and resurrect the queen." She smiled. "An ancient charm, long forgotten, on how to forge weapons of mass destruction specifically for angelic beings." The golden weapons around them seemed to twinkle and sparkle at her words.

"I couldn't tell you, Linc, but I already knew what to do. Your message was a beautiful reminder."

I wanted to cry but Elijah was thinking ahead. He grabbed me by the throat before I had time to react and held a knife to my abdomen.

"If anyone moves, she dies," he snarled. Suddenly, we were transported to the queen's chamber. She looked as if she would fall apart with a strong gust of wind. Her body was even more brittle, but her eyes were alight with determination. Still, her expression was wickedly content.

"It's been unlocked, my child. The end for you is near, Elijah."

He screamed and threw me across the room. I slammed into the queen's glass cage while she stood tall and proud, despite her crumbling frame.

Elijah looked like a rabid beast snarling and foaming at the mouth. He grabbed the crown, moving toward me in a flash.

"This will have to do, I can't let twenty-five years of hard work go down the drain because of you and some silly little gatekeepers," he said as he loomed over me with a wild look in his eye.

"Elijah, stop!" I screamed, trying to blast out with my magic, but it seemed to dim and flicker. I looked at my hands helplessly.

"You didn't conserve enough energy to wield your magic with longevity. I will teach you how to control it but first, you will take what is left from the queen and you will be joined to me for eternity!" He moved

to place the crown on my head. I rolled to the side to try and evade him, but his hand came around my ankle and he yanked me towards him.

I yelped and tried to claw away. The queen stood there with a ferocity I had never seen on anyone before.

“Come here, you stubborn girl!” He yanked hard on my hair, whipping my head back.

“No!” I screamed. But it was too late. The crown was already moving towards my head and there was no path to escape. Horror gripped my chest as Elijah solidified the grasp on my hair and slammed the crown on my head.

Everything went black before it burst into technicolors. I screamed again and a crack popped loudly in my ears. I didn’t know if something had finally broken, or if my head actually slammed to the ground as the weight of the queen’s full magic blasted through me.



WHITE SEARED my eyes and something was wrapped around me; like a boa constrictor slithering around my arms and legs. The world snapped into focus with a loud pop. My fabric materialized, moving around me like a living being. The queen was smiling at me from her cage and Elijah looked delirious as he held Priya in a choke hold and wielded a dagger with another hand.

“Magnificent,” he breathed as I felt the surge of all the power swirling within me. I floated to the ground and reached for the crown trying to take it off my head but it was cemented to my skull. I yanked hard but nothing happened.

“You cannot take it off Lincoln, it’s a part of you now. The queen has but minutes left to live. Her power is nearly all siphoned away,” Elijah snarls. “You will do as I say or I will erase Priya from existence and not even you, with the queen’s power will be able to restore her.”

Priya’s eyes hardened. She didn’t look scared, she looked ready.

I choked back tears, trying frantically to think of a way out of this. I had nothing to break the blood ruby with. All this power, and it was useless against him because I didn’t know how to control it. He knew the

secrets, the loopholes, and the flaws of the power in my hands. He had years to plan this and I had days.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered to everyone and no one.

"Stay strong child," the queen said. Elijah snapped his gaze over to her, and Priya moved slightly.

For a brief moment, everything happened in slow motion. Priya pushed the dagger in Elijah's hand to her chest and leaned in screaming. I looked in horror as blood blossomed across her breast, and for one second, Elijah looked shocked as well. She ripped the dagger out of her skin and took a wild swing at Elijah who seemed to be just as confused as I was.

She barely nicked his forearm as he snarled and secured the hold on her neck. She threw the knife in a wide arc toward me and it clattered to the ground with her blood and his mixed together.

"Take it! Use your blood as the last ingredient and bathe the red ruby in it," the queen hissed.

I scrambled for the knife as Elijah tossed Priya to the side and roared, reaching for it. I closed my hands around the sharp end and cut myself as Elijah ripped it from me by the handle. I quickly wiped my hand around the ruby and squeezed everything I had into my palm to extract the blood and wait for something to happen. There was a pause in the chaos as if everyone held their breath, but nothing happened.

Elijah laughed darkly. Priya was pale and bleeding on the ground. The queen had fallen to her knees and looked seconds away from dying herself. I stood there with my mouth agape, my fabrics swirling around me, the crown still glued to my head.

I closed my eyes and screamed, sending my fabrics slicing out sharp as knives as one wrapped lovingly around Priya and the other went straight into Elijah's chest. I manipulated them to snap up the dagger now loose in Elijah's palm and flung it back to me. I bared my forearm and snarled as I cut even deeper and dug my hand into my own blood, smearing it across the blood ruby willing it to be enough. I wrapped my fabrics, now soaked in Priya's blood and Elijah's, around the stone and pushed with all my magical strength against the crown.

Something shifted.

The air electrified and there was a sizzling sound like a lit fuse and then the whole room shuddered. The blood ruby cracked, and a rush of power pushed into the room like a black fog, eating everything in its path.

The glass cage shattered and I flew back, throwing my hands up and calling my fabric to protect not me but Priya.

A hum filled the air like an electrical current and the crown became heavy on my head before it slipped off in a loud thud. The jewels fell off and withered away, breaking into ash as the crown itself melted into molten liquid and disintegrated.

“No...” I heard Elijah mumble. The dark light went from black to purple to blinding white. It filled the space and reflected off the millions of glass pieces littering the room creating a disco ball effect. “No!” he screamed again and expanded his wings in one large flap, but the queen rose before him.

She stood tall in all her grace and her skin, which was once dead and peeling, glowed with a healthy, supple shine. Her eyes gleamed, and her hair floated around her as her rags slowly turned to a gown that was black as night. It sparkled as if lit with a thousand tiny stars. She held out her palms on either side of her and power erupted from them forming two large golden orbs as she walked to where Elijah had backed up against the wall, frozen by what I can only assume was the queen’s magic.

“You are no longer worthy of the afterworld, Elijah. I should have destroyed you like I did Anthonia all those years ago. Except this time, your power will be scattered, never to be corrupted by you or anyone else again!” She slammed her hands towards his chest and the air exploded as he cried out and then nothing. The queen breathed heavily, tears slipping down her cheeks.

She turned to me and crouched down. “I will take Anthonia’s power from you too, child, but I will leave the deathwalker in you. It was always supposed to be a gift for those who showed courage. I will also take back the seed I have planted of my own power. You served the realms well. And now, I ask that you protect the afterworld and mortal realm as a deathwalker always should.” She placed gentle hands over my heart, and the sensation of cold ice raced through my veins before warmth returned. I felt the absence of the powers, but welcomed what was left behind. “I am sorry my child, it should have never come to this.” She walked over to where Priya lay wrapped in my fabrics. The queen waved her hand, and the fabric unraveled, leaving Priya’s bleeding form exposed. Her chest barely rose.

I choked on a sob and crawled over to Priya. “Will she be okay?” I asked, suddenly terrified that we had fought so hard to be together and it may not have been enough.

“Her will to live is strong, it is not her time yet. She will be the next great oracle for many years to come.” With that, she pressed her hands to Priya’s wound and it slowly knotted itself back together. Color returned to her cheeks and her breathing stabilized. “Come child, there is something I need you to do with me before you return to the mortal realm.” The queen reached her hand to me. I looked at Priya, then back at the queen. “I will have some of my attendants come get her and place her in a room,” she said warmly.

I nodded and grabbed her palm. “Is the border back in place?”

“Not yet, but it will be.” She guided me out of the room and I looked once more at Priya’s sleeping form.

It was time to fix the afterworld.

The first place we visited was The Gatekeepers Grove Elijah had shown me. The queen released the souls to their eternal rest in peace by singing a soft lullaby that soothed their confused and restless souls. It brought tears to my eyes as their scared forms seemed to sigh with relief. They turned to silky strands of wispy energy as they sailed away towards their finally resting place.

I felt lighter as we watched each and every form be released, like shooting stars, making their way home. The grove turned into a meadow where tall, soft grass grew and flowers dotted the surface.

The deathwalkers were next.

The queen repeated the same ritual and I could feel the balance of the afterworld slowly start to shift. The cages dissolved and a place once desolate and filled with malice turned into another gentle field. The process took longer here, as the queen sang for what felt like hours. Each time, little pieces of their beings seemed to knit themselves back together and release back to their original forms.

“Shouldn’t we be fixing the barrier first? Not that I am not grateful, I just don’t want any more unnecessary casualties, you know?” I didn’t know how long we’d been with the gatekeepers or the deathwalkers, but it felt like hours. I followed the queen into the glass elevator that would send us back up to the manor.

The queen smiled at me, her full lips stretching. “As my power returns, so does the stability of the realm. It’s like a plant that was close to death and now has the water, sunlight, and nourishment it needs to continue to

live once more. The same can be said for everything my magic touched. It's now no longer dying, but healing."

I nodded and allowed the anxiety that had ridden my body for the last several days to finally find a form of release.

"The manor, the barrier, the stability, and the balance of the afterworld is once again being provided the power it needs to continue to function. It will be a bit unstable for the next few days, but I will make sure nothing else slips through." She winked, then her features darkened and a look of guilt and grief flashed over her face.

"Elijah and Anthonia's betrayal should have never happened. They were made from me and my own divinity. I believe they became too enthralled with the idea of power and control. They slowly convinced themselves that they were better than others, that they were more deserving of deciding people's fate," she said harshly. "Even though I am removed from the mortal realm, I know that much corruption plagues it. I see it in the mortals who come here. Those who think they are better because of the color of their skin, whom they love, and the sex they have."

My eyes widened. The queen was quite observant.

"They perpetuate violence, especially on those they dehumanize and see as less than. My magic was created in a time when those things did not exist. I must admit, I have done little to be proactive about preventing such things from happening, since I cannot leave this place. Therefore, I am tasked with the duty of being reactive, not proactive." Her voice was somber. "The world cannot be fixed by one single person, despite the power they have. It is not your sole responsibility to teach people to be good people. People have been taught to think this way for centuries. It is everyone's responsibility to combat it."

She sighed and continued on.

"Society will always want to push others up whilst, simultaneously, shoving other people down. You cannot control the living and the dead, but I do think there are ways that we could be more impactful, as a gatekeeper community, to aid the world in the right direction." She folded her hands and took a deep breath.

"There are already a lot of people doing really great work in the mortal realm fighting for the rights of all people. Maybe we could create a special gatekeeper committee, or task force, to create an initiative for something better or something more," I suggested. "I don't know if that's the right

answer, but I do know there are some really wonderful people, who have first-hand experience with the injustices you speak of, that would be essential to this work. I can't speak to everyone's experiences but I can speak to mine." I smiled. Who knew I would be talking about social justice with the queen of the afterworld?

As the glass elevator soared through the levels, I could feel and see the afterworld repairing itself. It was as if Spring was arriving, and everything was brighter with new life.

"It's not often a queen seeks advice, but I would love to continue receiving your council and do more to create better balance in the mortal realm any way I can. Thank you, Lincoln. You have more power and strength than you know."

"I'm looking forward to being a deathwalker, and helping you and the gatekeepers and the entire afterworld," I said, grinning.

"Thank you for showing courage and hope when there seemed to be little left." She returned the smile, little wrinkles crinkling her eyes.

Suddenly, another question itched in the back of my mind. "Elijah said I wasn't special and that's why he picked me. *Hardly worth noticing*," I whispered, just now realizing how shitty it had made me feel.

"He was right *and* wrong. Everyone is a unique and special being in their own way. So in that way, I suppose, none of us are special. But he did not pick you at random. The power called to him and it made sure you were the one to receive it. It was always your destiny, child." She folded her long, pale fingers in front of her.

"That's better I guess," I mumbled. The queen laughed, the sound loud and bright.

The glass elevator stopped and the doors slid open to reveal the manor once again. No longer was it crumbling and reeking of decay. It now oozed modernism with sleek lines and details, showing wealth.

"Shit, that was fast," I said under my breath.

The queen chuckled once more as she walked in front of me, and all I could do was follow along.

"The manor is the closest to my magic and the easiest to repair. I imagine it looked quite archaic before." Her long, black skirt swished against the clean, white marble tiles as she walked.

"Will the deathwalker lines be reinstated now that your magic is, once again, fueling them?" I asked as we continued to move through the



hallways of her home.

“Yes, and I will be starting over with my angels of death. I will give eternal rest to those who are still loyal, and banish those who aren’t.” Tears shown in her eyes. “Then I will create something new. I should have been recreating my beloved angels every couple hundred years anyway, but they are my children. Saying goodbye is hard, regardless of who you are. And eternal rest is lovely and desired, but still hard for those who get left behind.” She smiled back at me, her cheeks now wet with tears.

We stopped in front of two large double doors that looked like the entrance to a grand hotel suite.

“I thought you might want some time with your beloved,” the queen said, waving her hands to the door.

“We will talk more about these ideas of yours tomorrow morning. For now, the realms are safe and you should enjoy the one you love.” She nodded and swept away in a flurry of, what looked like, gold glitter. The doors cracked open and the only thing I could see was Priya sitting on a black leather couch. Her brown skin glowed with life once again, and her mess of dark hair pulled back to reveal her slightly shaved side. I wanted to run my fingers across it.

“Lincoln!” She stood abruptly and we ran, colliding into one another, in a flurry of tears.

“Priya!” I sobbed against her and we fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs and snotty noses. “Are you okay? How are you feeling?” I asked, prying myself off of her to look into her eyes and hold her face.

“I’m fine. The queen’s healers fixed me up remarkably well.” Her voice caressed my skin.

“I never got to say I love you.” My hands shook as they found hers.

“I love you too,” she said, placing a kiss on my brow, then my nose, then my mouth. It was as if everything else faded away and there was only her.

“The queen is a raging liberal, ready to fight the injustices of the mortal realm,” I whispered against her lips. Priya laughed loudly and threw her head back.

“What?” she giggled, her eyes sparkling.

“I’ll tell you more about it later. But right now, more kissing and less talking!” I pulled her on top of me, smashing my lips against hers.

“You started talking first!” she said against my neck as her lips trailed down.

“Semantics. Anyways, no more work today. We already saved the world. We get a day off,” I replied as she sat up, straddling my hips and smiling down.

“Say it again,” she said, her golden eyes simmering.

“I love you,” I smiled goofily at her. “I love you, I love you, I love you!” I started shouting deliriously. We both collapsed in a fit of giggles at my ridiculous outburst. I grabbed her hands and intertwined our fingers. “I love you,” I whispered quietly.

“I love you too,” Priya said.

Then we got lost in one another...again and again.

The new world could wait. Right now, I was simply happy to be in the arms of the one I love, fighting for a better tomorrow.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

This book was extremely difficult for me to write because it has a lot of borrowed events from my life. The broken engagement, the sexuality awakening, and so many other bits and pieces of my own story that I was very wary to share. But we all have messy parts, and this love story is one of my favorites.

I love being able to explore my own journey with others, with my own twists and turns and, of course,...with magic! I wanted this story to be entertaining, light, and fluffy in a way that makes your heart smile.

Additionally, the book was incredibly hard to edit. This is my second book, and it's a stand-alone. I didn't want to be finished with the characters or this story, but every good story has to have an ending.

I felt that, because I had done this self-publishing thing once already, I would know exactly how this one needed to go. Turns out, I didn't! And that's okay! Each book, and each story, is different and has many different needs. Lincoln and Priya needed a little extra editing and love to make this story complete.

It was really important to me to get as many LGBTQIA+ people working on this project as possible, and I am really proud of the work everyone did to make this book a reality.

Remember that your own sexuality isn't dependent on who your partner is. Your identity is still valid despite who you are, or are not, in a relationship with. I am still working to figure out what label fits me best, and it may be that no label is perfect. But I know, for sure, that the label of "straight" is not it.

Thank you for going on this journey with me. I am humbled and honored that you would want to read what floats through my head.

Reviews on Amazon and Goodreads are so helpful to independent authors. Additionally, if you chat about it on social media, please tag me! I would love to hear from you all.

I write to tell important stories and make connections. I hope this book brought you a little magic, love, and joy.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the entire army of people who helped make this book possible.

Thank you to my parents, for their unwavering support.

Thank you to my partner, Logan, who absolutely believed in me every single step of the way and is truly the genderbender match to my bisexual chaos.

Thank you to my book besties and followers, who cheered me on from the beginning, especially Hannah. You are an absolute rockstar.

Thank you to my beta readers, Claire and Sam. You helped me see more clearly than I ever did before.

Thank you to Sydney, my editor and Booktok friend. I am so thankful to have you here with me.

Thank you Sam, for polishing this story and making it truly shine.

Thank you to Allison and Belle, from Love Letter Creative, for the beautiful cover.

Thank you to my other friends and family who have stood by me as I've pursued this wild ride of self-publishing.

Thank you to all the queer people who came before me, whose stories we've never heard and who paved the way for all of us who are discovering who we are. I was lucky enough to have a supported journey, but I know not everyone has this luxury or privilege, especially my friends in the BIPOC, trans, and fat community.

Thank you to all my Booktokers. I would, literally, not be able to take this journey without you all. You've been my cheerleaders and readers through it all. Thank you for being phenomenal.

And finally, thank you to the readers who will find this book and consume every page. Stories are important. Yours is important. Thank you for being part of a little piece of mine.

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## **REVIEWS**

If you want to share your thoughts and feelings about “Deathwalker,” please share your review on Amazon and Goodreads. Additionally, feel free to send an email to [info@madisonnicolebooks.com](mailto:info@madisonnicolebooks.com). I welcome all feedback and would love to hear from you!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Madison Nicole is a twenty-six-year-old new author who currently lives in Kansas City, Missouri, where she teaches yoga and group fitness full-time. You can catch Madi playing video games, reading fantasy romance novels, and practicing aerial arts when she's not writing or working her day job. Her favorite indulgences include iced coffee, tequila, and dark chocolate. She is excited to continue to explore her writing career and bring more fun stories your way!

Check out Madison Nicole's other book, *The Immortality Trials*, [here](#), or get a sneak peak of the first chapter on the next page!



# **MORE BY MADISON NICOLE**

THE IMMORTALITY TRIALS

Madison Nicole

# THE IMMORTALITY TRIALS

## *Chapter 1: Greer*

“**A**nother round of tequila shots, sweetheart,” the man slurred. He wasn’t the first man who’d thrown out pet names while I worked my tables, and he certainly wouldn’t be the last.

His half-lidded eyes raked over my body from where he was sprawled out in the corner like he owned the place. The man looked human, but that didn't mean anything. Looks could be deceiving and, human or not, this large man with pale skin, a receding hairline, and an asymmetrical handlebar mustache ate me up with his eyes. It made me want to claw them out with my long black fingernails until my hands were bloody.

He was already drunk, along with the rest of his companions. All of them were impeccably dressed in dark, expensive suits and they were throwing money around, clearly celebrating something.

“Top shelf only,” another one of them bellowed.

“Absolutely, coming right up,” I said with a flash of teeth through my dark red lipstick and a swish of my long wine-colored ponytail.

*More alcohol means more money.*

*More alcohol.*

*More money.*

I silently chanted in my head.

*Ugh.*

I ran over to the sleek black countertop where my bartender, Arlo, was already lining up the limes and clear liquid. He’s a dragalúme, which

means his senses are heightened and he moves with precision and grace. Not to mention, his skin is covered in iridescent scales that reflected the candles and smoky lights of the lounge.

His snow-white hair was pulled back in a low bun, so his high cheekbones and dusty white eyelashes were on full display. He wore black head to toe, with a dress shirt buttoned all the way to his throat and a pair of slacks that hit right at the ankle. The whole staff was required to wear all black at The Shadow Lounge—part of the allure, I suppose.

It was once said the dragalúmes could reflect light in a way that made them nearly invisible. Light benders, according to the old texts. Apparently, they were skilled in espionage as well. At one point, they were coveted operatives by the old kingdoms and their skills were deeply sought after, but that was long ago.

When I asked Arlo if he could bend light after our shift one day—with a few shots making my head fuzzy and my speech bold—he snickered and said it was only rumor. He claimed that the only thing his kind does with their “abilities” now is eavesdrop on other people's business and work more efficiently than others, while looking beautiful. I knew we would be good friends after that.

Arlo gave me an apologetic smile through pale lips as he glanced over at the table of rowdy men. There were eight males in total filling up the deep green velvet couches in the corner. It was a slow night since it was a Thursday, and they were, by far, the loudest and rudest ones here.

A few pairs of people were milling around, but everyone else was engaging in quiet conversations on their dark velvet chairs or snuggled into alcoves, sipping leisurely on their drinks. These men had come to get plastered and, honestly, who the hell gets this hammered on a Thursday?

Usually on Thursdays I get let go early, but not tonight. Tonight, I would be here until the very last one of them left. By the looks of it, it didn't seem like they would be going anywhere any time soon.

I quickly collected the shots through a few pouty sighs.

“Greer...play nice,” Arlo teased as he deftly filled other glasses with amber-colored liquid. His bone-white fingers were covered in gems that created a kaleidoscope of colors on the bartop as he worked.

Arlo knew I could take care of myself, but I'd come in with an attitude at the start of my shift and I was having a hard time snuffing it out.

Attitudes don't equal tips...and I wanted the tips, especially from these annoying males.

"I'm always nice," I replied with a wicked grin and a wink.

I was fine to deal with annoying and disgusting males. Most of the time. But tonight, I just wanted to go home. I wanted to sleep. I wanted them to leave and I really wanted to never hear the term "sweetheart" *ever* again.

I easily navigated through the dimly lit lounge and black glass tables. The lounge was supposed to feel dark, moody, and sensual with the mix of candles, sparkling black crystal chandeliers, and expensive cocktails. This evening, I was fitting right in with the dark and moody part. My black velvet thigh-high boots clacked along the black marble floor as I made my way over to the table of boisterous males.

"Eight tequila shots, top shelf...", I said through a smile, trying not to look like I was grimacing. One of the men, who looked to be about mid-twenties, wrapped his slightly green fingers around my wrist as I set down the liquor.

*Ew.*

"You should take a shot with us." He smirked, showing off his rows of pointed teeth. His hair was as black as his eyes and his dark navy suit almost looked like it had been painted on by how tightly it wrapped around his body.

I always show up to my shifts in a black long-sleeve for this precise reason. Males like to get handsy.

Tonight, I had chosen a leather bodysuit that circled my throat, with mesh paneling running along my ribs towards my hips, plus fishnets and black satin shorts. My usual array of constellation piercings studded my ears, and glittering rings accompanied my pale hands—a girl needs a little sparkle to add to the drama. The sleeves of my bodysuit connected to my middle finger for the exact reason that I could not tolerate drunken males touching my bare skin with their greedy fingertips and hungry eyes.

Truly disgusting.

It was something that the other servers had warned me about early on and I experienced relatively regularly, especially since I'm human. I might as well wear a glaring red sign on my forehead that says, "Please try to take advantage of me because I am weak and vulnerable." Except I'm not. I can damn well hold my own, even if society likes to pretend otherwise.

Why any male is inclined to touch *anyone* without their consent was beyond me. It took everything in me to not spit in his face, with the darkness surrounding my mood tonight. I was practically looking for a fight at this point, but I tried to rein it in. Rage pulsed through my veins while I grabbed the man's fingers and pried them away from my arm.

"Unfortunately I can't drink on the job, boys," I said with a wink and a swish of my hips, as I easily maneuvered out of his reach. The other men snickered, and the male hungrily followed me with his dark eyes.

"Maybe another time then, *human*," he said, his tongue flickering over his lips.

*Go fuck yourself.*

"If you're lucky," I called over my shoulder while flipping my hair. More snickering and laughter followed.

The males stayed for three more hours, finally stumbling out around one o'clock in the morning, being the last ones to go home. There was a constant stream of shots, cocktails, and bottles of champagne throughout the evening. But at least they tipped generously.

*I don't know what you all were celebrating, but I'm glad to take your money.*

Arlo and I were the last ones here as I counted the bills and rounded up the last pieces of glassware.

"Arlo, go home. I'll finish cleaning and lock up," I said.

Arlo raised one of his snow-white eyebrows and pursed his lips. "You sure?" he asked, tipping his head slightly, the small chain on his earring brushing his sharp cheekbone.

"Yeah, go home to your husband. I'll see you tomorrow," I said with a genuine smile for a genuine friend.

I don't know how old Arlo is. Could be thirty or three hundred. All specialized species live far past the average age of a human and have the aging process to match.

"And this is why you're my favorite, dear," Arlo said, quickly finishing up the glassware and kissing me on the cheek, light as a feather. "Be careful going home. Can you please text me when you make it?" he said, stopping at the heavy black metal door.

"Of course," I said, turning my back to him and wiping down the tables. I heard the metal door groan as Arlo cheerily said goodnight, then it slammed shut.

I sat down on one of the plush velvet loungers and unzipped my boots and wiggled my toes. I closed my eyes and fell back on the soft cushions for a moment to relax. My feet ached and my eyes felt heavy.

Maybe I would ask Leah to cover my shift tomorrow. I had made plenty tonight, and I was exhausted. I could curl up with a bottle of wine and see if Lux wanted to watch a terrible Netflix rom-com.

Maybe a night off would help my sour mood.

It wasn't anything in particular that was weighing heavily on me...just the fact that I was twenty-four and felt like I didn't know what the hell I was doing with my life. But, you know, it was a casual identity crisis. Not a full-blown anxiety attack...yet.

I sighed and wondered if other people felt like this, like life was simply passing them by and they were a bystander, not an active participant. I shook off the dramatics and told myself that I didn't need to have it all figured out. It was fine. *I* was fine.

"Are you seriously sleeping?" a deep voice sounded from the direction of the doorway.

"I'm taking a second to breathe because I had to deal with eight testosterone-charged hooligans for over four hours this evening...and I'm exhausted from my internal pity party," I said, not bothering to open my eyes. I knew that voice like I knew my own. It was my best friend Luxton, but to me he's Lux.

He is fairly familiar with my pity parties. They had been happening quite frequently lately. Lux always listened and offered support; it's one of the many things that I absolutely adore about him. He doesn't shove answers down my throat, just a steady presence of love and empathy.

I felt a shift in the lounge as he sat right next to my head. The heavy weight of him caused my head to dip. I squinted up at him.

"You didn't have to wait for me," I said.

I knew I should've texted him earlier, but those males had kept me busy most of the night. Usually, we walk home together when I work late. It's not that I can't handle myself; it's just that you don't know what sort of things might be lurking in the shadows, and Lux worries after my pretty human head.

The Shadow Lounge is on the upper west side of Odessa, the Republic's capital city, which is normally pretty safe, considering this is where a lot of the money is in the city. The higher up you are in the city,

the more money swirls and dances around the streets. The upper west side is home to many bars, clubs, restaurants, trendy Instagram spots, and all kinds of expensive entertainment.

We lived right on the outskirts of the upper west side so, ideally, it should be fine. Except sometimes, I took shortcuts through alleys, snaking through the city to get home faster, which really doesn't guarantee safety the way the well-lit streets of the city do. And *one time* I had a run-in with some male that pulled a knife out on me. I keep a switchblade on me at all times because, where I grew up, you weren't to be caught empty-handed.

He landed a deep gash on my forearm and Lux had freaked out. In all fairness, as soon as that motherfucker saw me charge him with my own weapon, he scampered away—but not before I nailed him with a slash on his chest. But I am a human woman, a relatively easy target by society's standards, so it's not like Lux's worries are unfounded.

*It just is what it is.*

Either way, I can take care of myself, but it is nice for him to worry, to care.

Of course he cared—Lux and I were roommates and best friends. The luxurious penthouse apartment we shared was courtesy of his dead parents who, if you asked him, he had mixed emotions about them being gone. It may seem weird, but they weren't close. In fact, they had very different ideologies, the main one being that Lux's focus should've been on continuing their magical lineage with another shifter.

They had many heated arguments about Lux's pansexuality and his choice to not have children, and when they died in a helicopter accident a few years ago, their entire multibillion-dollar tech company went to their son. They'd wanted to keep their magic bloodline perfect for their shifter magic, and having a son who didn't care about any of that at all was really just not in their plan for their shifter legacy.

Lux immediately hired someone to take over, and moved to be a silent partner, but he still would never need to work a day in his life if he didn't want to. He mostly worked high-end consulting jobs nowadays and worked to give money back to those who had also suffered from toxic relationships and had their sexuality used against them.

Even though his parents treated him poorly, their deaths were still hard to deal with. He bought a whole building where rent was basically non-existent for those who needed a safe place to stay, then sheepishly asked

me to move in with him so he wouldn't be alone in the large penthouse that occupied the top floor. Not only was this a truly spectacular deal for me, but I would do anything for him. We had met in college and immediately bonded over margaritas and tacos.

I had a flash of memory of the first time we went out together. He wore a shirt with *LGBTQIA+* written across it and I wore a shirt with a pride flag. We both laughed and immediately bonded, since it was literally painted on our chests what we stood for. I smiled at the memory and how we had fallen into one of those soul-deep friendships that seem to only come around once in a lifetime. We have many memories around frozen margaritas and tequila shots.

He never seemed to bat an eye at the fact that I don't have a lick of magic or that I would only live to be maybe a hundred. He once told me that society and its cultural standards could go fuck themselves and I think that was really when I knew that, no matter what, we would be tied together forever.

When I first moved in, Lux told me I wouldn't need to get a job if I didn't want to, and I had scoffed at that. I loved living with Lux, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let him fund the rest of my life.

After graduating from college with a degree in engineering, I realized I didn't know what I was supposed to do with that. I had chosen engineering because I grew up poor. My mom told me it would be a way to save us, if I could get a nice job, and at the time I believed her. Except there was no way for my job to save her anymore.

I winced, thinking about the places I had lived in growing up. We went from crappy motels to dirty apartments, "friends'" couches, our car, and finally to a steadier place in the RV park. My mom was so excited when we finally had a place of our own in that park. It was where I learned how to wield my switchblade, hot-wire a car, and live off practically nothing. Sometimes it felt like a faraway dream, considering where I was now.

Some days, my life now feels like a dream. My mind is a strange place sometimes.

I remember thinking that everything would be magically fixed once I graduated with a degree, as if becoming an engineer would be the saving grace of my mother's life and eliminate my own guilt and shame about the things we did to survive, things that hung around my head like a cartoon rain cloud.



So now I was stuck with a degree I didn't particularly like or care for, that reminded me of my dead mother.

I had worked odd jobs trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life until The Shadow Lounge became a full-time gig. Anything else I looked at offered shit pay, even if the hours were better. And I liked the people. Arlo is the owner and the bartender, and he made me feel less alone. He made me feel seen and heard in a way so many didn't because I am human.

But I was only twenty-four years old, for gods' sake...I had plenty of time to figure my life out, right? My impending identity crisis came in waves, and right now was just a particularly low point.

In the meantime, I got to live with my best friend in a nice-ass penthouse that I would probably never *ever* be able to afford in a million years. So what if my housing and lifestyle peaked in my twenties? It would be fine. *I* was fine.

"Yes, I did. We don't need you getting into knife fights regularly. I would hate to bail your ass out of jail...again," he said gently, chuckling and pulling me back to the conversation, as I had drifted deeper into my sour thoughts that had perturbed me this evening. But Lux was good at that. He made me feel safe, and he did bail me out the one time I had started a bar fight in college.

I cracked a smile, remembering how some drunk idiot had tried to start a fight with Lux by taking a swing at him. Except Lux hadn't been looking, and the dumbass's face met my fist first before he could land his punch on Lux. No one messes with my best friend.

He started to untangle the ends of my ponytail with his callused dark brown hands, and I gazed lovingly up at him. Lux was breathtakingly handsome. His thick black hair was in braids today, reaching down his back and tied loosely with a piece of black fabric. His golden eyes are bright and framed with thick dark lashes. His bone structure makes everyone swoon, as his sculpted cheekbones match his perfectly sculpted cupid's bow and studded nose.

He is broad and muscular, with tattoos swirling around most of his six-two, dark brown body. He wears the tattoos like an accessory, changing them some days or keeping some for years. The advantage to being a shapeshifter is that he can manipulate any part of his body on a whim. But he keeps this image pretty consistently as his own.

However, shifters long ago were punished for shifting into others' identities. It was the Republic's way of keeping them in check. Everyone was required to have a way to be easily ID'd that matched who they were in the Republic's system. So, this was the version of Lux I had always known. Bright eyes, dark skin, handsome as sin....

Everyone always tried to put us together but, in reality, there was absolutely zero romantic interest from either party. It was easy for them to assume I was *his* arm candy, since not very many of the wealthy and powerful toted humans around as more than playthings. But our love was one of family, not romance or lust.

"Can you snap your fingers and have this place cleaned up and us on the couch at home?" I whined, shutting my eyes and turning to bury my face into his thigh.

He laughed darkly and replied, "I'm not a witch or a teleporter, but maybe we should find some and befriend them to help you next time."

Groaning, I sat up and rolled through my neck. I could do this. Taking a deep breath, I looked at Lux and said, "Okay, fifteen minutes. Feel free to time me." I winked before I vaulted up and started racing around the room without my boots, quickly trying to clean up the mess that all our patrons had made this evening.

"Done," I shouted, panting slightly. Sweat dripped down my brow and I rapidly wiped it away with the back of my sleeve. Lux gave me an amused smile and uncrossed his jean-clad legs. He smoothed out his white shirt, adjusted the lapels on his camel-colored coat, and stood up.

"Fourteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds. Not the best, but Arlo will love you all the same." He snickered. "Let's go."

I swiftly zipped up my boots and grabbed my purse, then shrugged on my red faux-fur coat and shut off the lights. I walked through the heavy metal door and locked it tight.

"Let's go home," I said. I looped my arm through his and laid my head on his shoulder as we walked through the quiet city streets, bathed in moonlight.